

This Is the Happiest You Will Ever Be

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Senior Honors Thesis

English and Comparative Literature

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

May 1, 2021

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Foreword:

I took a course on the history of writing last semester. The first paragraph of supplementary material I read for the course said that writing is separate from art. While it was necessary to understand this definition as a cornerstone on which something intricate and individual would develop, I still had trouble wrapping my head around the statement. Writing is separate from art. If I would have taken this history course my first year, you would have had to twist my arm before I submitted to enrolling in a creative writing course. But here I am, with a degree in English and a concentration in Creative Writing and a thesis that I am immensely proud of. I am glad I did not take the history of writing course my first year but, at the same time, relieved that I got the chance to take it at all. I was too impressionable and short sighted four years ago. I still am, in a sense, I suppose. But I know who I am and what I want and who I want around me. All of these might change, will change, but for now I rest comfortably in my temporary coffin of likes, dislikes, hopes, dreams. I won't tell you what my for now looks like, though, because it will change.

I had bangs in middle school, hyper aware of the influence Justin Bieber had on girls my age while also pretending I was not attracted to the guy myself—while I pretended to hate him and said mean things about the sound of his voice. The bangs were terrible and I was worse but both are excusable. At least, I am able to excuse myself. You do not know what I thought of myself and so I can not be embarrassed for thinking those things. I won't tell you what I think of myself now because I will grow and understand and breathe life into my surroundings until I can no longer do anything. A promise, for me, is prettier than an expectation. One births another, sure, but only if you believe I'm telling you the truth in the first place. Also, I forgot to mention, this is a collection of fiction stories.

Everything is completely made up and not true. This is for you and a grade and a degree and not at all for me and I hope you hate it. No, this is the foreword and forewords are true. Here. Let me begin again as I always will. I am graduating soon. I am twenty-two years old and drowning in sentiment. I wrote a collection of stories this year and I hope you enjoy them. It's something that is mine that I want to be yours as well. It's history, in a way. It's art, if you ask me.

I dedicate my thesis to the families who drove me home from baseball practice when I wasn't sure how else I'd get there. I got there. And I'm here now. And I know my house was out of the way. And you know who you are. And if I didn't tell you enough then: thank you, I love you.

This Is the Happiest You Will Ever Be

In the white dogwood tree there is a red cardinal. There is a red cardinal in the white dogwood tree. Orlando thinks that if he were to write a sentence in a story about a bird in a tree he would arrange the words in a way that made the reader see the swaying branches bursting with white blossoms before they saw the red flash of wings as the bird hops higher and higher and higher. But he is not a writer. He is a lawyer. In his free time, however, he reads anaphoric poetry that doesn't rhyme and scatters itself across the page as if the poet cut words from a dictionary and threw the words against a piece of paper covered in glue to make poems called: "Hydrangea until tomorrow" or "Because we fire." They help him think.

The white dogwood tree reminds Orlando of heaven and the red cardinal reminds him of his husband. His husband used to watch birds from their kitchen window, a window Orlando refuses to

look out of now. There's my cardinal, he would say. It wasn't until his husband killed himself that Orlando understood what he'd meant by *my* cardinal. Every red cardinal you see is the same red cardinal because every red cardinal is red and a cardinal and there right where they are supposed to be, flying or perching or eating seeds you scatter on the ground. Every red cardinal reminds you of your husband who loved cardinals who killed himself two years ago after a government issued bracelet that tracked his dopamine and oxytocin and serotonin and endorphin levels told him that he would never be as happy as he had been once before ever again.

Before making this judgement, the *D.O.S.E. of Happiness Activity App* said they considered these chemical levels alongside years of security camera footage scoured by facial recognition software to track frequency of smiles and laughs, and self-reported data collected at app installation. Orlando speculates his husband had not been able to remember a moment in his life that had been full of undying happiness. His husband had decided there was nothing to look forward to. He, alongside 48,353 Americans, leapt from something high to something hard or shot himself through the brain or drove off a bridge into a lake.

Orlando never found out how his husband killed himself. That first week Complete Life Bands were issued and locked on wrists, 3-ton trucks roamed the streets, collecting the bodies of those whose app had gone quiet. Orlando had come home from work to a black ribbon tied around the doorknob of his cherry red wood door, note attached. Condolences written in serif font. How formal of death, Orlando considered during his three days of isolation and severe depression. Times New Roman and satin. Orlando looked down his street and counted four other notifications. He coined the term suicide

cul-de-sac. Then he turned on the news. 48,350 other people gone, overnight, somewhere alone but all together. The black ribbon business did well that day.

Orlando tosses more seeds on the cobblestone ground in front of him. The park is hot and he is sweating through his crisp blue button-down. He's in a bad mood because he wants to be in a bad mood. He is saving his happiest moment. He's sure he doesn't have to worry about stumbling into his happiest moment today, but he does this every Sunday. He reminds himself of his dead husband so there is a sense of dread he can carry on him like a cedar wood cologne for the rest of the week. For all he knows, happiness could act like dominos—small moments leading to others until he opens his door to a cake with red icing that congratulates him for his happiest moment after someone simply tells him they like his shirt. Happiest moment gone. So he wears his dead husband cologne and refuses to eat the Boston Cream Pie from his favorite store and only visits his grandparents on Christmas. He doesn't let himself fall into inescapable depression, *per se*, but walks a tightrope, knowing that what is below him is terrible but far away while being able to ignore what it is like to be on the other side and safe and without total misery. Orlando figures he will open himself up to happiness when he finds love and money. This is all he's ever known to desire. And he has neither right now.

The cardinal flies down to its feast. This doesn't happen often. Birds usually stay in the trees until Orlando leaves. But this red cardinal comes close. Its head twitches as it considers him, as it hops closer, picks up a seed and cracks it in its beak and hops even closer. Orlando smiles. For a moment he considers having a moment. He wonders what it would take for this event, this happening, to register in his brain as something good and important. Dare he accept this scene as a sign from god or the universe or his husband reincarnate? How would his brain open, then, to the idea of happiness? The

bird flaps its wings and flutters up to his knee. Orlando stops smiling. His heart beats hard. He cannot be happy. He is sweating through his shirt and alone in a park. He hasn't had sex in eight months and has pushed away all of his friends and has tens of thousands of dollars of student loan debt. His husband is dead. He turns 30 tomorrow. Now is not the time to look for happiness. His happiest moment must come when he feels comfortable and content and in love.

"Fuck off," he tells the bird. It doesn't listen. He bounces his knee. The cardinal seems to extend its wings slightly to stabilize itself. The two make eye contact. "Fuck off," he says again. It doesn't listen. Orlando thinks of a Nordic book he read as a kid. The main character kept a raven as a pet. That bird got lost in a blizzard, but not before it poked out the eyes of the character's abusive father, not before the boy and bird spent nights looking at stars after they were thrown out of the village, not before the bird made the boy feel like living was something done together. Orlando considers the cost-benefit analysis of keeping this cardinal as a pet.

Cost	Benefit
More attuned to happiness.	Well-balanced life. The D.O.S.E. therapists off his back.
Constant reminder of his husband.	Constant reminder of his husband.
\$50 for a bird cage.	A friend.

Orlando thinks it would be nice to not have D.O.S.E. therapists knocking on his door every Monday. “Are you committed to living?” they ask when Orlando opens the door. “Your levels are low.”

The door-to-door therapists deployed one week after the mass-suicide event. They read from a script:

“D.O.S.E. is a program that aims to promote life appreciation. The Happiest Moment feature is meant to help us remember and enjoy the things that did happen, not dwell on those that did not and most likely will not. Our team has concluded that the feature helps more people than it has hurt. It will stay. And so will we. We are committed to your happiness.”

Orlando remembers slamming the door the day that therapist came knocking and preaching. A blonde woman in boots. He remembers her knocking again. “Are you committed to living?” she yelled. “Yes,” he shouted back though he wasn’t sure that he was. Every week since a therapist knocks at 8 in the morning on Mondays to ask the same question. Only three times were his levels high enough so as to warrant a peaceful breakfast. Twice it was the day after the *Survivor* season finale. Orlando imagines the other time was because he had landed an associate gig at Neiman & Fredrickson the Friday before. He remembers being excited to begin to chip away at his student debt. It also could have been because he had received in the mail his copy of a book an ex-flame had written. He remembers being excited to look for any sign of himself in the pages of poems. But, as he read later in the week, he couldn’t find one. There was a line about a hookup at three in the morning but that boy had a rough tongue and sad eyes. Orlando thought that surely couldn’t be him. The therapist knocked on his door the next Monday. “Are you committed to living?” they asked and he said, as he would for every week following, “Yes. I am.”

He is committed to living because of a hope for moments like this, tiny cardinal claws poking through his corduroy pants. But he must save serendipity.

“Fuck off, bird,” he says again as he swats at the cardinal. He catches the bird by surprise. Struck and broken somewhere, the bird falls to the ground in front of him. It flaps but does not fly. It moves in a circle, tossing seeds in the air with its wings. Orlando sucks in all the air his lungs can manage and tries for more. His muscles tighten. “I’m sorry,” he says. The sound of wings against cobblestone.

“Do you want to hear something horrible?” a man says from behind.

“I just hit that bird,” Orlando says.

“Obviously, yeah. I watched you. Why d’you do it?”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“Were you aiming for something else?”

“Who are you?”

“Something horrible.”

Orlando turns around as the man smirks. He’s wearing a white t-shirt with the sleeves cuffed. In the middle of his chest there rests a smiley face printed in black. He wears boots laced all the way up. He is a door-to-door D.O.S.E. therapist. There’s a calm to him that Orlando has never sensed on Monday mornings. His hands are in his back pockets. He’s chewing gum. Orlando isn’t sure if it’s the man’s aura or the shirt but he finds this presence obnoxious—though the man’s deep brown eyes hold up thick eyebrows and threaten to warm something cold inside of him.

“It’s not Monday,” Orlando says.

“A guy can’t take a stroll through the park?”

“I figured you people would want to take off those shirts when you’re not on duty.”

“Oh, I am on duty,” he says. “Technically. On my way to see if some 60-year old ex-cop is still committed to punching the life clock.”

The man sits down next to Orlando. He smells of lavender laundry detergent and faintly of bleach. The cardinal’s wings beating against the ground and the man chewing and popping his gum form a percussive racket that claws at Orlando’s brain. He’s never had a conversation with a door-to-door. He’s never wanted to.

“Name’s David,” the man says. They both stare at the bird. “He looks like he’s breakdancing. That’s the horrible thing I was going to say.”

“Should we do something?” Orlando asks.

“We?”

“Me, I guess. I. Should I do something?”

“Why haven’t you done anything yet?”

“I’ve been thinking of my options. And you’ve been distracting me.”

“What are your options?”

“Kill it.”

“Yes.”

“Call animal control or something. I don’t know. Who saves birds?”

“Controlling and saving are different things.”

“Can you at least pretend to be off-duty? Christ.”

David laughs and stands and walks over to the breakdancing, broken cardinal.

“Would you like to know what I think?” he asks in a way that says Orlando would be better off if he did.

“Sure,” Orlando says. The beats of the bird's wings begin to slow and soften.

“It seems like both of you are suffering. Both of your options would, in theory, eventually end both of your suffering. If you call some bird people to come collect this guy and nurse him back to health, you successfully unload this burden on to someone else and can pretend it never happened. You did something good. You did something good but only because first you did something bad. To that, I would say that this is just a bird. But you're not going to listen to that.”

Orlando stares at the cardinal. Its neck at 90 degrees against the cobblestone. He thinks of his husband. What he must have looked like as the life drained from his body.

“On the other hand,” David continues. “If you kill it, put it out of its misery, you will have to bear the weight of this horrible accident for some time. You will remember what it felt like to crush. But to that, I would say that this is just a bird. This is a bird that will not survive no matter who you call. This is a bird that, even if it did survive, will have to sit in a shoebox in some office with no windows for who knows how long. There's a ratio I like to consider: suffering to hope for well-being. How much suffering makes any sort of hope for well-being seem, well, silly. At what point is it too much? There are a couple factors, I think. But, again, this is just a bird.”

“Aren't you supposed to be committed to living?” Orlando says. His heart begins to beat loudly against his chest again. He is not happy. He hates how his body does this—reacts to happiness and despair in the same way. Can it not tell the difference?

David narrows his eyes at Orlando. He smiles a little smile. "Depends on the definition of life. But I'm willing to sacrifice a piece of me for you, if you'll let me. Because I think you're cute and because I don't think you'll let me take you on a date tonight otherwise, I will take care of it."

Orlando considers David as a person and not a door-to-door for the first time. He is pretty. The color of his bottom lip fades from brown to pink as it disappears into his mouth. There is a line impressed just past both corners of his lips. Maybe he smiles a lot. Orlando doesn't remember the last time he felt such an inclination.

"No," Orlando says. "I'll do it. I'm not looking to be happy anytime soon."

Orlando walks over to David. The cardinal doesn't move except for the slight, quick rise and fall of its chest. Orlando wonders if the movement is from the bird's breath or its heart beat. He hovers his foot over the red and then looks into David's eyes and then stomps, hard. David screams.

"What? What?" Orlando yells.

"I just wanted to make sure you didn't hear the crunch," David says before kicking the bird corpse off the cobblestone. "Do you want to grab a drink?"

"What about the retired cop?"

"We can stop on the way."

"We?"

"Yes, we."

David begins to walk and Orlando follows him because he wants to have sex with him. David is annoying enough so that climax with him would feel less like happiness and more like relief. Enough of

his levels would stay stagnant. That is something Orlando can handle. It is something he needs. Maybe it will help him forget his dead husband.

The cardinal felt different today. It made him feel like he was killing his husband. It made him think, did I kill my husband? This was a debate he thought he had buried. The week following his husband's death, Orlando blamed himself. He thought horrible things. He thought that his husband had been devastated that his happiest moment had come before Orlando's—that if he hadn't made Orlando happy by then he would never be able to. Then he thought that maybe his husband had never been happy with him in the first place. He must have figured that his happiest moment had come before he met Orlando because Orlando had never been enough. Something must have always felt like it was missing or would soon disappear. Orlando didn't know. He had been able to convince himself that divorce is a lot easier than killing yourself. He'd drained the hate and regret and confusion from his body like syrup from a maple tree. But when he crushed the life out of the cardinal, it all came back, filling him up and threatening to spew out. He wants David to tap him. Drill, hammer, empty him again.

The walk takes about half an hour. The sun starts to dissolve into the horizon. At sunset, a man gets on his knee to propose to his girlfriend at a marble fountain in the city center. Everyone walking past turns their head and looks away. David watches Orlando watch the display.

"Have you already had your happiest moment?" David asks.

"No," Orlando says.

"You're not scared of being happy?"

"Not after stomping on that bird."

The man starts to cry. Tears of joy, Orlando assumes, because he stays on his knee. The woman covers her mouth. She nods. She uncovers her mouth. Of course, she says. The man drops his head, happy. Then something washes over the woman. She drops her hands to her side. She looks around. The man looks up with a smile that makes Orlando want to cry. Then the woman rears back and slaps the man hard across his face. They both cry. The man stands and wraps his arms around the woman. They are engaged. They stand there, still—two people saving something they know nothing about for someday they think will be better than this one.

“Jesus,” David says.

“Is that suffering or well-being?” Orlando asks, beginning to walk again.

“Is that a question?”

“For some reason,” Orlando says as he looks at David’s shirt. “It is.”

The retired cop lives on a street of one story brick houses that all look the same. The only house-to-house difference is the landscaping. David says this is basically a community for old people with no income. They are able to pay a small enough, one-time payment for their property and from then on avoid rising rent and taxes. The only downside is that they can’t paint or nail holes in walls, and the city can tear down their house whenever they need to make room for a highway or a McDonald’s. They get two weeks’ notice. Orlando asks what happens then. David says they either move in with their kids, go back to work, or kill themselves.

“Or go to jail, I guess,” David says, his voice low. “You know what the city does with homeless people.”

David stuffs his hands into his back pockets again. He looks from lawn to lawn. One is full of plastic pink flamingos arranged in the shape of a heart. One is overgrown—weeds, yellow and purple, dance into thick, dying grass. One lawn is nothing but pristine, two inch, deep green fescue. This is Ranger's, David says as he points to a German Shepherd tied to a flagpole in the middle of a well-kept lawn. A huge American flag flies half-staff. The dog doesn't bark but it stares at Orlando.

"I know he's cute, Sadie," David says. "But he's mine for the day." He jogs over and scratches the dog on the butt. She wags her tail like she's been waiting for this for a week.

David calls into Ranger's open front door. Yeah, yeah, Orlando hears him say. Ranger waddles into view. He's wearing a crisp red plaid shirt tucked into wide khakis held up by navy suspenders. His readers hang from his neck by a beaded chain. David tells Orlando his granddaughter made him that for Christmas. He smiles as if he's proud.

"Do you have regulars?" Orlando asks David. He's never had the same door-to-door two Monday's in a row. The one he sees most often is named Shirley but she never stays to chat. She's always either winded from the steps or preoccupied by her hairdresser's most recent mistake.

"No," David says. "I stop by Ranger's every week because he reminds me of my dad."

"Did he kill himself?"

"No," David says, laughing. "He did not."

"I'm alive," Ranger grumbles.

"Alive and well, I see," David says. "How's the knee?"

"Hurts."

"The toilet?"

“Broken.”

“You wouldn’t know how to fix a toilet, would you?” David asks Orlando. Orlando shakes his head no. The three stand there staring at each other.

“Who’s this?” Ranger asks.

“Isn’t he handsome?” David says.

“Looks queer.”

“Well I know he’s queer, but isn’t he handsome?”

Ranger grumbles and starts to shuffle back to wherever he came from.

“Why is the flag half-staff?” David calls after him.

“Because I’m sad,” Ranger growls.

“Tomorrow is a new day,” David tells him with a smile on his face.

“What about him reminds you of your dad?” Orlando asks as the two make their way downtown.

“His warmth,” David says. “His charm.”

David asks if they can stop by his apartment so he can change shirts. Door-to-doors don’t do well in bars. Orlando says sure. The apartment is only a couple blocks away. Brick turns into periwinkle plastic siding that turns into concrete and metal and glass until the two stand in front of a skyscraping needle David calls home. There is a doorman even though the 12-foot glass doors slide open on their own as the two step towards them. David, the man says as he greets them. David blows him a kiss. The sound of David’s boots thumping the lobby floor ricochets off the marble walls and fills the room.

Orlando cannot hear his own footsteps. It's almost as if he is not there. He stomps once to be heard and David turns around.

"Careful," he says. "You'll get bird guts on the marble."

They ride the elevator 27 floors. If all door-to-doors live in apartments like this, Orlando thinks, no wonder the one with her ever-frizzy feathered bob hates the stairs. He wonders if David would tell him how much this place costs. He can't remember at what stage of a relationship people can ask one another that sort of question. He has already asked him if his father killed himself. Nervousness and numbness surely shouldn't affect him in the same way. Which one is it? He decides not to ask. David answers anyways.

"Government subsidizes this place. Still expensive but we get paid well enough."

"It's nice," Orlando says.

David asks him what he does for a living, and he tells him.

"Your place must shit on this."

"Not exactly."

"Oh," he says. "Well, someday. I can pay for drinks until then." He smiles.

"About that," Orlando says. "I don't drink."

"You don't drink? A lawyer who doesn't drink. What do you do when you have nothing to do?"

"Watch Survivor and read poetry."

"That keeps you from killing yourself?"

"I guess so."

"Why not have a drink while you're at it?"

“Alcohol releases dopamine and serotonin and endorphins.”

“Until it suppresses them.”

“Don’t want to take the risk.”

David’s apartment does not have walls. One big room houses the kitchen and living room and bedroom and walk-in shower, all encased in tall windows. Orlando’s eye catches a deep green velvet sofa in the shape of a half-moon holding plush coral pillows. There is a chrome statue of a buck in the corner. The shower’s glass is clean, and Orlando wonders if David cleaned it or if he paid someone.

“How old are you?” David asks as he tosses his keys in a bowl of limes on the kitchen island.

“30, tomorrow.”

“Shut up. Happy Birthday.”

“Thank you.”

“So what are you waiting on? Why are you so scared of the chemicals in your brain?”

“You know why.”

“I do. But you’re going to have to be happy someday.”

“Someday. When I’m in love and can afford to be an alcoholic.”

“You don’t want to fall in love with me?” he asks, smiling.

Orlando wonders if he can get used to the lines that cut into David’s cheeks like canyons, remembering something mighty. He doesn’t know if he is jealous or if he wants to kiss them. He knows that he is confused.

“Why are you happy?” Orlando asks. “How?”

“Because D.O.S.E. is bullshit.”

“No it’s not.”

“I work for the people, Orlando.”

Orlando explains the science. It isn’t entirely empirical but it’s there and backed by studies. Sure, there was the man who had his happiest moment for a second time after he won \$539,000,000 in the lottery, but he had a brain aneurysm two weeks later. The government website tells you to imagine your favorite shirt as a kid. You would have worn it every day if you could. But you couldn’t and can’t. You have to dress up for other occasions; and your head grows bigger; and if you shove yourself into the shirt over and over, the hole stretches and rips. Then your shirt is no longer a shirt. You still remember it as your favorite shirt but you can’t wear it anymore. You can buy a new shirt that fits the same way but it will never be your first favorite shirt, and you will never be able to feel what it feels like to wear your favorite shirt for the first time after you realize it’s your favorite shirt.

“I got a notification that I was having my happiest moment in bed next to my girlfriend after she pegged me for the first time,” David says, taking off his smiley face shirt and putting on something pale blue. Orlando notices the curly hairs covering his chest. “It wasn’t like some gay revelation—I always knew I liked my ass played with—she just really fucked me good. That was like six months ago. I was so angry. Embarrassed maybe. I don’t know. I broke up with her. Told her I never wanted to talk to her again. There was no way I was going to let someone have that power over me. Looking back, though, I’m even more embarrassed now than I was then. I mean, come on. There’s no way that was my happiest moment. No way. My asshole was on fire. But at that moment, I thought this little bracelet was infallible, something I could never understand and would just have to believe. Like god, I guess.”

David walks over to his bar and pours himself a drink. He looks at Orlando and then screws on the cap. He puts his left hand in his back pocket as he sips.

“Then my mom killed my dad in a murder-suicide. He’d been blessed with his happiest moment that morning playing golf. Hit a hole in one. My mom thought he’d cheated on her. I remember her yelling. What does she do that I don’t? What does she feel like? Look at what I gave you, she said—meaning me, I guess. Is that not enough? My dad was speechless. Speechless or very quiet. Maybe he was wondering the same thing. Wondering why hitting a hole in one made him happier than marrying his wife or having a son. Not sure. I left. I went to the country club to ask if my dad had been there that day. They were framing his picture on the wall. Hole in one on six. I took a picture. Went home. Too late.”

David stops here and finishes his drink. He tells Orlando how he wanted to quit D.O.S.E. He didn’t believe them anymore. He told his supervisor that happiness isn’t a target your brain only hits on its last bullet. There are some things you can’t measure. Hope is as strong as nostalgia. The government should make sure people have food and water and someplace to stay, not define their happiness. Who gives a fuck if people are happy? He says he asked this three times before his supervisor answered. Who gives a fuck? Who gives a fuck. Who gives a fuck—

“What did your supervisor say?” Orlando asks.

“She asked me who I thought gave a fuck,” David says. “And I already knew the answer.”

“The people who were satisfied with their happiest moment?”

“No. No such thing. The people who make money off of us buying their product.”

David explains. He mentions the rise in depression and suicide rates in the 2040s caused by global warming and the push inland. People losing everything, unwilling and unable to start anew.

“Let me zoom in,” David says. “Millions thought living was so pointless they did nothing. They lied in bed or stabbed themselves with something sharp that was probably already in the house. They didn’t buy anything, they didn’t consume. They didn’t go to work. This was a problem.”

This is what D.O.S.E. wants to solve. They want people to be happy so they will continue to contribute to the chain of production—not because they care. Orlando knows, from the news, that D.O.S.E.’s success is multifaceted. That’s the word they use. But he isn’t sure if he should take the word of a man who lives above the clouds on what it means to be taken advantage of by a capitalist system. He knows what this is like. It’s inherent. Oppression is as intrinsic to capitalism today as it was at its birth. But the government wouldn’t put forth measures to monitor the mental health of its citizens to make sure they made it to the mall on Black Friday. Now? When the world is swallowing itself?

“It’s helped so many people though,” Orlando says.

“Rich people.”

There was significant revenue across industries. Tourism and real estate boomed as the demand for remembering happy places rose. Companies created algorithms based on the chemical levels of audience members, viewers, customers, followers. Orlando remembers the first time his favorite *Survivor* contestant found an immunity idol the morning before she was supposed to be voted off the island. His dopamine levels shot up. And apparently so did the levels of the rest of the *Survivor* community. The next season they invited the contestant back onto the show. She found three immunity idols the day before, the morning before, 20 minutes before tribal councils she was destined

to leave from with a burnt out tiki torch. With each week the contestant avoided elimination, Orlando's feeling of relief and hope for the contestant's revenge decreased. When she finally left the island, on a unanimous vote, Orlando's Complete Life Band lit up green. He had figured this was the way life went. What he hadn't anticipated is the way powerful people were able to direct life in whichever way they wished, over and through and in spite of everyone else. Powerful people like David.

"Seems to be helping you," Orlando says.

David sighs and stretches out his arms.

"I'm still a door-to-door so I can help shut it down. Discreet band key distribution starts tomorrow."

David tells Orlando about the team designed to secretly distribute tools to remove the Complete Life Bands, and the team rewiring checkpoints and ATMs and transportation systems so you don't need a band to come and go and take your money out of the bank. There's a team designing informational pamphlets. Nutrition and first aid teams, just in case. He says everything will happen gradually and then all at once. Orlando tries to swallow. Something is coming and he feels like he is in the way, that he should turn around and start running so he is up to speed by the time it hits. David's eyes are tired but alive with something exciting. The blue of his shirt looks good against his skin.

"The app should shut down tonight at 9," David says.

"What do we do until then?"

"Wait," David says. "Sit next to someone you hate a little bit." He slaps his hand on the cushion next to him. Orlando smiles, walks over, sits. He thinks about his bare wrist, about going to the park, about jumping on a trampoline and doing a cannonball into a cold pool in the middle of summer and

running as fast as he can until he can't run anymore. He thinks about what used to make him happy. He thinks about his friends—how they could pull laughs out from his stomach. He thinks about their reunion. He thinks about love. He thinks about his husband and then pushes the thought away because that thought makes him sad. He thinks about kissing David. He kisses David. Orlando takes off David's clothes and David takes off Orlando's. They stand, and David walks Orlando to the chrome statue of a buck and leans him against the cold metal. Orlando opens himself. Once David is inside he makes himself at home. Orlando plays with David's ass. Their breath and the heat of their skin fog the metal. David tells Orlando he is going to make him come. And he does.

By the time they finish, the apartment is dark. They lie naked on the tile floor like cadavers. Orlando's wrist feels heavy. He knows his band is green. He refuses to check his app. If this is his happiest moment he will never know it. The app will crash sometime soon. Happiness will be something right where it should be—something Orlando will let dig its tiny claws past his pants and into his skin.

"You kind of have a rough tongue," David says.

"What time is it?" Orlando asks.

"Wait, I like it. Don't leave."

"No," Orlando says, laughing. "Is it 9 yet?"

David curses. "That's right." Orlando watches him open his phone. It's 9:23. He clicks into the app. It loads.

"Hm," David says.

"What happened?"

David closes out the app and loads it up again. "It's still there. Check yours."

"No," Orlando says. He looks at David. Inspects him. How long has it been since he's had to read someone? Could David be lying? David is lying isn't he? He just wanted a fuck, Orlando thinks. D.O.S.E. isn't going anywhere. David likes it. He likes living up here and seeing people down below and plucking them out of the park and tearing them apart and throwing them out the window. He likes bleaching his white shirt and going door-to-miserable-door and smiling his smile. He must feast on despair like he did Orlando. That must be what it is.

"What? Check for yourself then," David says.

"You're full of shit aren't you?"

"Come on, not this. You don't think I fucked you into your happiest moment do you? Just check."

Orlando doesn't know what to say.

"These things take time," David says. "I told you. Gradual and then all at once."

Orlando puts on his clothes, and David watches him from the floor. He grabs his phone and turns it off without looking at the screen. As he reaches the door, he hears David tell him he is sure he will see him soon. He wonders if happiness has an incubation period. He knows that if there is a chance that sudden hot rage can boil away chemicals the brain has just released, his happiest moment will stay far from now.

In the lobby, the doorman ignores Orlando. His footsteps are quiet. For a moment, he fears the sliding glass doors won't open for him. When they do, he exhales. Home is far away. He walks. Stars are out. You never see stars in the city.

Orlando is shivering by the time he makes it home. He hadn't expected to be out this late. His phone is still powered down and he has no intention of turning it on. The walls of his one bedroom apartment feel tight. No lights are on. Buried alive, Orlando lies down on his futon fully clothed and sleeps until the sun wakes him up.

There is a knock on the door. Orlando jumps off the couch. If a door-to-door came to visit, he must not have been as happy as he briefly felt last night. This is good. He checks a mirror on his way to greet his therapist. He fixes his hair. Only one knock today? No shouting? No peeking through windows? He opens the door. No one is there.

There is a pink box on Orlando's doormat. Patsy's Bakery, printed on the top. A cake. For his birthday. Did David—? No. He's the only one who knows. But he doesn't know where he lives. Does he? He wonders what door-to-doors know, what they can find out. He grins, thinking of David logging into some high-security system to search for his address. An apology, maybe. He opens the box on the kitchen table.

Red icing reads: Congratulations on your Happiest Moment.

Orlando's heart rattles in his ribcage. He slams his fist on his chest because it's making too much noise. Congratulations on your happiest moment. Orlando finds his phone and slides it on a charging plate. He will check his app now. Maybe it will tell him his happiest moment came much earlier in the day yesterday, when a red cardinal hopped onto his knee. Maybe there will be a timestamp. There has to be a timestamp.

The cake is at least two layers. White frosting is smooth on top and ridged on the sides. Dollops like clouds dot the edges. Orlando uses his finger to scoop a blob of frosting into his mouth. Buttercream, like his wedding cake. Too sweet now.

Orlando turns on his phone. It's 8:43. He will be late for work. The *D.O.S.E. of Happiness Activity App* icon is white with a black smiley face in the middle. The same from David's shirt. Orlando clicks. His screen turns black. A small white circle spins and spins and spins. The app closes. Orlando clicks again. Black. Circle, spinning. Back home.

Orlando looks at the cake. There's no note. Where's the Times New Roman? Orlando grabs his biggest knife. He thinks before he cuts into the cake. He laughs to himself, thinking of David. He thinks of his own sort of rebellion. He lays down the knife. He pushes his hand into the cake. It's cold and feels like mud until something small and hard hits his fingers. He pulls it out. The piece of metal is grey and ridged and, Orlando notices as his blood starts to mix with the white frosting, sharp.

Red and white wash off nicely in the sink. Orlando dries the piece of metal. He looks at his Complete Life Band. It almost looks like it's vibrating, like it knows it's on its last breath and heartbeat. Orlando hovers the metal over his band. Something clicks. The band separates into sections connected by steel cable. Orlando shoves the key under the wire and starts to saw. He tries to avoid slicing at his wrist but the wire is tough and the key is small and Orlando is excited. More blood. The band snaps off, and Orlando screams. He doesn't hear the sound the metal makes when it hits the floor.

He looks out his window. His green grass is dusted with drops of dew that reflect the morning sun like a pulverized mirror. There are no cardinals and that is a good and a bad thing. For the first time in two years, only he knows how he feels. And he lets himself feel a sadness so immense he has to sit

down. He misses his husband. His husband's name was Damien, and Damien liked to go for a run at sunset when the Hinson's let their Great Dane puppy out to use the bathroom. When he jogged back into their own driveway, he would see Orlando's silhouette against the gold and orange, and the pinks and purples. He would say, over and over, that it looked like a painting, and Orlando would roll his eyes because everything looks like a painting if you look at it in the right way. But Damien would tell him, if Orlando articulated his point, that he would never hang any old painting on his walls. He would only hang beautiful paintings that made him happy. Besides, he would continue, even if he could paint he wouldn't paint Orlando in front of the sunset. There was something about going for a run and doing something difficult before coming back home to someone who always smiles when he sees him that makes it worth it. It's a prize, he would say, and it's mine. That is what Orlando remembers him saying. You're mine. And he was, and Damien was his, and it felt good.

But it didn't feel good enough. Damien is gone. Orlando wishes now that he had known how to paint and that Damien had hated running and puppies so that he could have painted a self-portrait and hung it on the wall and reminded Damien of who he was leaving behind before he killed himself. He doesn't know if it would have made a difference and that makes him sad. It would've had to. Life is something difficult but it's done together. Coming home to him was a prize. "I'm worth it," Orlando now whispers to himself. "I'm worth it."

Orlando doesn't have money and he isn't in love but both will come. And if they don't, then that will be OK. He feels foolish, looking out of the bay window in his kitchen for the first time in a long time. How foolish of him to refuse to cope with Damien's death out of fear it might make him happy, out of a deep shame, thinking that a happiness that comes after the death of the love of his life is

something fake and forced and secondary. How easy it was to blame his unhappiness on the government. The government is something evil but this is Orlando's life and he has watched years tick by like old couples watch traffic from their front porches. He's waved at every car that has tinkered past and asked himself where they're going but never if he should tag along. He's always hoped they were happy but has convinced himself they probably were not and that his porch, with its occasional shade and manageable draft, is safe. But Orlando has grown tired of safe. Even if they had found a way to measure happiness, some light or warmth or energy is better than nothing. Tomorrow is tomorrow because what might happen will be good or bad and we never know which it will be until it is tomorrow. He will embrace good, and learn from bad so he is better able to recognize the good. Happiness is hope persisting. Happiness doesn't weather. It changes shape, but all of it is still there. How to hold it and nurture it, Orlando doesn't know. But, he thinks, looking out his window and stomping on his bracelet and calling David and eating from this smashed cake with a fork is a good start.

Swim Dangerous Fish

Jude watched his brothers from up in a chinaberry tree take turns shaving their heads. Paul had plugged Pop's clippers into an exterior outlet that typically powered flood lights. Thomas grabbed a lawn chair from the shed. They weren't laughing. This haircutting was like surgery or business, something serious that had to be done.

When the boys didn't have to be at school, Pops said there was no reason for them to go all the way into the city and pay \$10 a head to cut something no one was going to see. But Paul's straight brown hair had grown too long for his liking. Jude noticed it was no longer than it had gotten the year before and thought it was strange how Paul hated it now.

"You're next, Jude," Paul said as he brushed off cut hair from Thomas's bare, sunburnt shoulders.

“No I ain’t,” Jude said. He climbed higher in the tree. He liked his long hair. Twirling it in between two fingers helped him fall asleep at night.

“You look like a girl,” Paul said.

“Yeah, Jude, you look like a girl,” Thomas said, parroting his older brother as he ran his calloused hands over his buzzcut.

It was the middle of summer. The sun was out and had scared the clouds away. The boys were shirtless and barefoot and wearing the same basketball shorts they’d slept in the night before. They planned to hike down to the river to swim. Paul’s friend was going to be there. High school kid. Mama, scrambling eggs that morning before her shift at the nursing home, had deemed Jude and Thomas too young to stay at the house by themselves. Paul would have to take them with him wherever he went. His older brother didn’t argue. Pops told the kids a month ago that if there was any backtalk towards their mother, their behinds would be slapped red like baboons. Mama hadn’t been feeling well. Jude didn’t know what it meant when his mother went quiet and stared straight ahead and ground her teeth for a couple minutes, but he knew that it was something that used to happen when she was a kid. And now it was happening again. And soon, he’d heard Pops tell Paul, she’d have to quit her job. And it all scared Jude, the episodes especially.

Paul stretched the power cord tight so he could look at his reflection in the window while he shaved his own head.

“Just because I got long hair don’t mean I’m a girl,” Jude said, aware that the longer his hair got the more he looked like Mama, not sure why that was such a bad thing.

Paul finished pushing the clippers over his head and looked up into the tree where Jude sat and said, "Whatever. I warned you. Get down here. We're leaving now."

The trail to the river started behind the boy's house. Once they'd found the quickest route, they'd tied shoelaces from old Reeboks around trees like Hansel or Gretel did with bread. The walk took only thirty minutes but today Paul said it would take forty-five. His friend had said that further down the river there was an opening, a place that flooded regularly that was better for swimming. His friend had also said that there was a fish with a pit bull's jaw who stalked the waters after heavy rainstorms. Bloodthirsty was the word he used to describe the fish.

"No such thing," Jude said, leaping over a mud puddle. "Not in North Carolina."

"You don't know nothing about nature," Paul said, stomping right through what Jude had leapt over. "Animals adapt. My science teacher says there's this kind of frog in Alaska that freezes its body to survive the winter. Its heart stops beating and everything."

Jude found this funny. Dying in order to stay alive. How scared the first frog that froze and thawed and came back to life must have been. How cold and then warm.

Paul told them that rain carried blood and guts from the slaughterhouse in town down to the river. And when the floods carried fish to this place they're not used to being they have to start feasting on the runoff. This makes them get big and dangerous.

"Why are we going to swim with fish that will eat us?" Thomas asked. The boys had come to the fallen oak they had learned to cross, and Thomas was waiting on Paul to go first so he could catch him at the dismount.

"Don't tell me you're scared," Paul said, before leaping down from the roots of the tree.

“I’m seven years old.”

“You’re a man, right?” Paul said. He caught Thomas and asked him again, “ain’t you?”

“Yeah,” Thomas growled, and the woods echoed, growling back. Paul smiled at Jude, watching his brother to make sure he landed safely himself.

“What about you Judy? You scared?” Paul asked.

Jude didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure if this bloodthirsty fish actually existed in the first place. He figured Paul was trying to scare him and Thomas. Though he wanted to tell his older brother that the prank wasn’t working on him, he would’ve been lying if he said his heart hadn’t lodged itself in his throat and throbbed.

“Has anyone caught a pitbull fish before?” Jude asked.

“Course not,” Paul said. “Bites right through the line.”

The boys stepped off the trail to pee. Thomas dropped his pants to his ankles and Paul stood beside him, shaking his head. Jude walked further into the woods.

“Going to squat?” Paul asked.

“No. Just don’t want to pee beside you two.”

“At school,” Paul said, “the fruity boys use the stalls. Won’t even go to a urinal if they got to.”

“Why?” Thomas asked, pants around his ankles.

“Not sure. That’s what Poncho said. Something about them getting a hard-on if they stand next to dudes holding their dicks.”

“Why’s his name Poncho?” Thomas asked.

“I don’t know,” Paul said.

“Poncho sounds dumb,” Jude said, shaking off the last drops of pee.

“Well you’re about to meet him,” Paul said. “Might want to hold off on saying that to his face.”

The woods opened up in front of the boys. Still they stayed along the edge, next to the river and the woods. To their left was a field of grass as tall as Thomas. When the wind blew just right, purple and yellow wildflowers would peek out from behind the dancing strands of green. Jude thought about gathering a bouquet of them and bringing it to Mama. She always said purple made her feel fancy. But he liked the idea of leaving the wildflowers wild, where they should be, and he knew that Paul or Thomas or Poncho would have something to say if he kept a bunch of flowers in his pocket. He didn’t know Poncho but the picture Paul had already painted of him was not very pretty. Not nearly enough purple.

“I bet Pops could catch it,” Thomas said about the fish as he pulled on Paul’s pockets.

“We ought to ask him,” Paul said.

Jude kept quiet. He knew his dad would say he could do anything.

The boys came to the final shoelace. The water where they usually went swimming was high and rough. Rain had torn away at the bank and left behind a little beach. Thomas took his shoes off to dig his toes into the sand and silt.

“Don’t get close Thomas,” Jude said. “It’s too rough.”

“I wasn’t going to,” he whined.

“Leave him be,” Paul told Jude.

Half an old oak tree stuck out over the river. The wood was dark, dead, and looked waterlogged. Paul put half his weight on the base of the tree and bounced.

“Y’all know you going to have to be brave to swim at this place right?” Paul said. “With the fish and all.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said.

“Well let’s make sure you got the guts before real life is on the line.”

Paul called Thomas over to the tree and grabbed him by the armpits and placed him a couple feet in front of the roots. “Walk,” Paul said.

The water licked at the tree. “Tick, tock, tick, tock,” Paul sounded, like the crocodile under the plank in *Peter Pan*.

“Paul, stop,” Jude said, knowing his words would be lost. Thomas smiled at his older brother and tip toed, backwards, towards the end of the splintered trunk. “He’s going to fall. He can’t swim in that.” But Thomas laughed. His feet sunk slightly into the wood with each step.

“Tick, tock, tick, tock,” until Thomas found the end of the tree and threw his hands in the air. “That’s what I’m talking about,” Paul said. He shook his head at Jude as Thomas jumped into his arms. “Your turn.”

“You know I’m heavier than him, Paul,” Jude said, driving his big toe into the clay in front of him.

“It’s safe, Jude, I tested it,” Paul said. “Come on.”

Jude wouldn’t. It didn’t make sense. The cool wet ground felt good under his feet and he wanted to stay where he was because nothing could fall out from under him. For a moment, Paul stared at Jude. Thomas did the same, but darted his eyes back at Paul every other second to make sure

Paul was still staring. Jude stuck his hand in his hair and it was hot. He thought that it was funny how the sun pulled rainwater out of the ground but made his hair wet with sweat at the same time.

“Jude sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to do.”

“Why?” Jude asked. He was getting annoyed. He didn’t understand the thrill other people got out of doing dangerous things. When the boys were younger, years younger, they had gone to the beach for a vacation. Jude wasn’t sure why they only went once or how they were able to go in the first place. All he remembered was the drive. It felt like days. His bottom went numb. He remembers going over a long bridge that connected the island to the mainland. Pops had told them all to hold their breath and make a wish and to not let go of their breath until they got to the other side. He never told them what would happen if they couldn’t hold their breath for that long and Jude didn’t plan to find out. But right as he was about to make his wish, his lungs and cheeks full of the cigarette and salt air circulating in the car, Jude noticed someone floating in the sky. He knew they weren’t falling because they were going slow. There was an orange and blue balloon above their head that Mama would later tell him was a parachute. She would say that they got in a plane and the plane took them very high and then they jumped. It’s fun to them, she’d said. Jude held his breath and watched them float around in circles and wondered what would happen if the parachute messed up. They would die. Their long, long life would be over for a couple minutes of something humans weren’t designed to do. Jude watched and watched and watched, and his head went fuzzy and so did his vision, and then he was out. He woke up to Mama over him in his carseat telling him to never do that to her again. You scared me, she said. He promised he wouldn’t ever do that again, and he intended to keep that promise. He didn’t

want to do it to himself either. He wished that he could go back over that bridge and hold his breath and not look up and make a wish. He wanted to wish for a long, safe, grounded life.

“Because that’s what men do,” Jude said. “They’re brave.”

“Mama’s brave,” Jude said. “She doesn’t do stupid things.”

“She is and I’m not saying she should,” Paul said. “God, Jude, why are you so difficult? You can’t be scared of things that aren’t scary. You have to grow up.”

“I’m 12,” Jude said. “I’m everything 12 should be.”

Paul turned around and kept walking. He held his head down, kicking pinecones and rocks a few feet every other step. Then there was a rock too big to kick. He turned back around.

“You can’t run and cry everytime Mama has an episode,” he said.

“I don’t!” Jude said. He realized he was about to cry and so he pushed past Paul and walked until Paul told him to stop.

“You do,” Paul said. “And I know it might be scary for you but it’s nothing to be scared of and you make it worse for yourself and for her and for Thomas and for everyone.”

Jude cried now and Paul let him. Thomas latched onto Jude’s leg and hugged him tight.

“Last week,” Paul continued. “Mama was mopping the floor. We were in the den and she was in the kitchen but we could all see her. We were watching *Funniest Home Videos*, and we were all laughing every once in a while until we noticed Mama was laughing during the commercials too. She was mopping over the same spot over and over, and laughing that low little laugh. You remember?”

Jude nodded.

“And you ran up to her, even when Pops told you to stop. You were screaming, Jude.”

“I was scared,” Jude said. “She disappeared. She keeps disappearing.”

“But she comes back,” Paul said. “She always comes back”

“Where does she go?” Thomas asked.

Jude could tell that Paul wasn’t sure either.

“Pops told me she goes inside herself,” he said. “Her brain goes inside out and she has to work to get it right. That’s all he said. But she can’t get it right, Jude, if you’re screaming and crying. You scare her.”

The boys kept walking then. Jude thought about running back and getting the purple flowers because he wanted to make Mama feel fancy but he wasn’t sure if he’d know how to get back if he did. The shoelaces ran out a while ago. He hated himself for scaring his mother into herself even more than she did herself, for breaking his promise. He wondered if the library at school had any books on brains and if he could check them all out at once. He wondered what he would do until then—how to grow up and be a man. Pops and Paul and even Thomas all seemed to know what it took. But Jude couldn’t ask them. They were born with it, whatever it was that made them men. How would they know how to earn it or grow it or fashion it out of mud and sticks?

His math teacher last year taught him how to guess and check. If he didn’t know how to divide a big number by a little number then he should multiply the little number by other little numbers until he got the big number. He would do that. Guess and check. He would stop screaming and crying and try holding his breath for a long time and swim with dangerous fish. Sooner or later, he would be a man.

The boys saw Poncho before they saw the swimming hole. He was tall but his legs were short. Leftover denim pooled at his feet, frayed and dirty from dragging the ground. He was shirtless and sunburnt like the rest of them. Shaved head too. Jude noticed that Poncho's eyes sat closer to his ears than his nose. The insides of them were green and popped against his red, pimpled face. He laughed as the brothers walked up the hill.

"Paulie boy," he said. "Just about went bald on me, did you?"

"Sup Poncho," Paul said. Jude looked at his brother. He'd made his voice deeper. His chest, too, puffed out. "This is Thomas and Jude."

"With that hair," Poncho said, pushing his dirty fingers through Jude's hair, "I know a couple dudes might give you a kiss if the room was dark enough." His laugh was wet and seemed to struggle through his chest. Jude twirled his hair and tucked it behind his ears.

"I told him to cut it," Paul said. He walked further up the hill. The rest followed.

Looking down from the top, Jude saw the ground had been sliced away like Mama does her triple-layer red velvet. Straight down more than the height of a basketball goal, the river swirled. It was more calm than the spot before, damned up by boulders and fallen trees. Jude looked for any signs of big-mouthed fish.

"Whose jumping first?" Poncho asked.

"How deep is it?" Paul asked.

"Nobody's ever touched the bottom."

"Why's your name Poncho?" Thomas asked.

"Because I won't wear no rain jacket no matter how hard it's raining," he said, proud.

“Why?” Thomas asked.

“Don’t need one.”

“Mama says you catch a cold if you stay in the rain too long.”

“Damn, Paul,” Poncho said, laughing again. “These fuckers do anything but suck on their mama’s tit?”

Paul looked at both his brothers, not sure how to respond. Thomas stepped behind Jude.

Jude decided that he had been correct. Poncho was dumb. If not dumb then mean. He wondered how Paul didn’t see it. Or, if he did, why he ignored it. He decided he would ask Paul when they got back home if every guy in high school was like Poncho—if Poncho was someone Jude should model his grown self after.

“You seen any fish?” Jude asked to fill the silence.

“Water’s too murky,” Poncho said. He hocked a loogie and shot it into the river. The mucus and bubbles slapped the water and spread out like they had somewhere to be. “We might have us some bait though,” Poncho said, leaning to the left to get a better look at Thomas hiding behind Jude.

Poncho grabbed at Thomas but Jude pushed his arm away.

“Fuck off,” Poncho said, surprised or offended or both.

“You fuck off,” Jude said. He’d never cursed before. Paul stood still, eyes wide.

Poncho shoved Jude to the ground as easily as God knocked down old, rotten oaks with wind and rain. Jude tumbled down the hill. By the time he stopped himself, his knee was gashed and head was pounding. Blood pumped from his knee on every beat he felt in his temple. Poncho grabbed

Thomas by the armpits, just as Paul had when he caught him earlier, and dragged him to the edge of the dropoff.

“Paul,” he screamed.

“Somebody’s got to go first,” Poncho said, smiling with his straight white teeth. He took no time to throw Thomas over the edge. From down the hill, Jude saw his brother flailing in the air for only a second. He sat, frozen, silent, until he heard the splash. He heard thrashing. He imagined a fish with the jaw of a pit bull ripping his brother’s legs off. He watched Poncho laugh. Paul, a statue, dug his nails into his palms. Jude knew this wasn’t right. Poncho might’ve been a man but he was also bad. Guess and check. And then he was running, Jude was, digging into the earth. At the edge, he couldn’t see Thomas. The water was too murky. He jumped.

The water sucked him in. Underneath, bubbles crawled up his body and he decided some of those must have been from his breath because his chest burned. His stomach hurt. He rose to the surface but he didn’t stay there. He took a deep breath and dove back down. Underneath, he opened his eyes to a wall of golden brown. Tiny black specks floated by his face and he tried to grab them but they were out of reach. He could see nothing else. What color does brown and blood red make? He called out to his brother underwater. Thomas, he screamed, as if he would hear him. His chest was a forest fire. He pulled his way to the surface.

“Paul help,” he yelled. His vision was blurred but he knew his brother was above him and so he directed his voice. “I can’t find him,” he called and called. But all he heard in response was Poncho’s wet laugh.

“I’m OK, Jude,” Thomas coughed somewhere to the left. “I’m OK.”

Jude tread water. He wiped at his eyes, pushed his hair back. His brother was on his knees at the edge of the river. There were no teeth marks. He had both legs. Still, he cried.

Jude looked up at Paul and Poncho. Poncho had his hand on Paul's shoulder. Paul looked at Jude. He was angry, Jude could tell. But there was something else. Paul nodded his head at Jude. He smirked. And Jude felt loved.

Then Paul knocked Poncho's arm off his shoulder.

Jude watched Paul rear back and drive a right hook across Poncho's nose. The two disappeared beyond the edge of the dropoff. Thomas scrambled up to see what happened. Maybe he thought he could help his older brother. Jude slowed his kicks and tried to float. Water filled his ears. It was warm. The sun made the river feel like a dirty bath. He would have to see if Mama could clean the gash in his knee when she got home from work. Jude was sure that she could. And if she disappeared while she was doing it, he knew she would come back and finish, and his knee would be clean.

Moving his head from side to side, his hair felt heavy. He imagined he looked as if he was dissolving, head first. He liked the idea of becoming the river, tearing away at the land, making his way to something bigger. He exhaled. Sinking, he waved his hands above his head like a helicopter in reverse. He found the bottom. It felt like they all did. He held his breath. His feet sank into the muck. It was cold. He kept his eyes shut. If there were any dangerous fish they were not interested in him or his brothers.

From cold to warm, Jude pushed to the surface. Paul and Thomas were standing at the edge of the drop off. They were holding hands.

"Look out Judy," Paul said. His lip was busted.

“Yeah, Judy, look out,” Thomas said.

And they jumped.

Red then Green then Yellow

RED

“Did you play basketball in highschool?” Will asks.

“Didn’t make varsity,” I say.

“Brake,” Will says as we crash into a red light. “You’re going to tear up your car.” He’s smiling, poking fun. The line of cars adjacent to us ease off the line and through the intersection. It’s night and we’re lit up red like the street.

“I’ve got it,” I say.

“What’s with you?” he asks.

I don’t know what’s with me but it’s been here for weeks. It coated me and soaked into my skin like sunscreen. We had been dating for three months two weeks ago. At a restaurant, after I called the

waitress Bill, trying to ask for the check, Will told me that he loved me. I didn't say it back. I treated it like a passing comment, a compliment even, and tipped the waitress 30%. I still don't know if I love him or not. The only person I've told that I love them is my older sister and even that was a stretch. What I knew at dinner with Will was that we were 20-year-old college students, only just out of the closet, with some catch up to play, some life to take back from years of isolation and loneliness and jacking off just to fall asleep. You love me because of what I represent for you, I thought. The first. Reciprocation. Romance and gentleness. Escape. But you don't know all of me. I can be more.

I tell Will that I'm tired.

"And upset with me?" he asks. His voice reminds me of a bleat in that everything he says sounds like a complaint, like I make him suffer.

"No. Upset generally, maybe" I say.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Well, I love you. Can I do anything?"

I begin to slowly take my foot off of the brake. The light is still red. Cars are speeding through the intersection.

"You've got to stop saying that," I say.

"What else am I supposed to say?" he asks. I wonder how many people in his life have told him that they love him, how worthy of love he must be for the expression to sit on his tongue like a hello or goodbye. It makes me mad.

"We've been dating for three months," I say.

"We've seen each other almost every day since we met, what do you mean? What are you saying?"

The front two tires inch over the white line.

“You think you know me enough to deal with me all the time?”

“Why are you stressing right now? Everything is OK.”

“Everything is not OK, Will. I’m not a good person. I destroy everything. I’m destructive.”

The back two tires cross the white line. A passing car honks lightly.

“You know the guy who took my virginity?” I ask. “I told you he was from my highschool? He was actually a 36-year-old married man I met at the YMCA. And when we finally fucked he slapped me twice in the face and told me that I liked it—that I was his and to take it. So I pushed him off and beat his face in until he stopped moving. Like I wasn’t sure if he was alive or dead.”

“Jackson, brake,” Will says as a Ford Explorer swerves to keep from T-boning my Corolla. The light turns green. I ease into the gas pedal.

“I hadn’t come close to getting hard when he was inside of me,” I say. “But I could barely pull my jeans up looking at him lying there. You can’t tell me that’s not fucked up.”

“You’re gentle with me,” is all he says.

And there is silence because I am not sure if I want to be gentle with him or not.

“He survived,” I finally say. “The man. I saw him that weekend at my high school’s football game. I don’t know if he saw me. His face was fine.”

We ride back to his place. The only words we say are mine. “Great fish tacos,” I say as I point towards a yellow truck because I know that Will loves fish tacos. He doesn’t respond. He looks at me long enough to pull my eyes away from the road and into his. And we hold each other in that way for a

second, before I have to look back and make sure I'm in the lines. But when I turn my head towards him again, he's faced the other way.

GREEN

I can't remember the first time I saw Manny. His son is my age. We have gone to the same school, played the same sports, chased after the same girls since we were kids. So I've seen him around games and parties and sleepovers for a while. I do remember the first time Manny saw *me* however. I was 15. We were playing pickup basketball at the YMCA. It was a Saturday. My shirt was on and his was off. He had been a captain and had not picked me. This was embarrassing, even though the guys he had picked were years older and a couple inches taller than me. He had looked me in the eyes as I stood shoulder to shoulder with other men and chose Derek and my friend Steven's cousin and a guy named Peanut. He had said that my team was going to be shirts and his was going to be skins. "I've got him," he said, pointing at me, after he took his shirt off and posted up in the paint. I wondered if he knew my name. I, still, felt seen. Hot in the face, even.

He did not take it easy on me. While he wasn't much taller than I was, he was stronger. When the ball kicked off the rim, he pushed his back into my front with a force I couldn't manage. I didn't get a rebound the whole game. My teammates wouldn't pass me the ball.

"You want to play varsity next year," Manny said. He mumbled it into my ear as I tried, desperately, to box him out.

I didn't answer. I grunted. Pushed harder.

“Get bigger,” he said. He shoved me out of the way and jumped towards the rim and brought the loose ball down and went back up and laid it in. He winked at me then. And the sweat on my skin started to sting.

In the locker room I undressed slowly. I had a nice body and he hadn’t gotten to see it during the game. I was big. I wanted him to see. I knew he was around but I didn’t look around for him because there are rules in locker rooms. So I took off my socks first, one after the other, then my shirt, my shorts, my underwear. I stood there as I was while I put my wet clothes in my drawstring. I counted seven heartbeats. I put my dry clothes on.

When I turned around, I saw him sitting on a bench across the room with a towel wrapped around his waist.

“Not showering?” he asked.

“Mom’s waiting,” I said.

“You look good out there.”

“Not good enough.”

“I’ve got a couple years on you,” he said and smiled. He stood up and walked towards the showers. The towel was tight around his waist and I looked because I couldn’t help it. He caught my eye as if he knew that I would. His mouth twitched into a grin. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and pretended to respond to a text message. I walked out of the locker room looking down. My mom was waiting in the car. She told me that I stunk. I told her that I knew, and that I was sorry.

YELLOW

“Don’t speed up when the light turns yellow,” my mother said. “That’s not what yellow means.”

I didn’t respond. We were on the way to the pediatrician, and we were already late. I had to get a physical before basketball tryouts started. I was driving. I didn’t have my license yet but I had my permit. I was allowed to drive if I had someone 21-years old or older in the car with me. The radio played a song I liked but I didn’t turn it up because I knew my mom would take it as an offense, me blowing through a yellow light and then drowning out her complaint with clean Kendrick Lamar. I tapped the steering wheel to the beat. The sun was out that day, and I remember it feeling warm on my hands.

At two minutes past three, I whipped the car into a parking spot. My mom didn’t say anything. She’s never liked being late either. We unbuckled silently and hustled into the doctor’s office. “Lock it,” she said, and I pressed the button twice until I heard a honk.

A nurse in purple brought my mom and I into a room trimmed with safari wallpaper. While she measured and weighed me, I thought of a story I had to read in English class the year before. In that story the wallpaper was yellow. There were scratch marks and shapes that moved and made the narrator think she was insane. I thought she was insane before she saw the wallpaper. Her arms were as long as the scratch marks. My teacher asked me if I thought she’d been in the room with the yellow wallpaper once before, and I told her there was no way to know for sure but, yes, I did. She was in a mood that day. She asked me if there was anything you can know for sure and I said yes but didn’t elaborate because I wasn’t sure. But I knew for sure, then, those animals on the walls weren’t moving and they

wouldn't be when I left. There was a knock on the door. Dr. Fereby walked in and the nurse walked out.

"Jackson, Jackson, Jackson," she said. She had pink shiny gloss on her thin lips. "Not done growing yet?"

"Looks like it," I said.

"Keep it up and there won't be many girls able to reach you for a smooch."

My mom laughed.

"I can bend down," I said.

The stethoscope was cold but Dr. Fereby's hands were colder. She told me to take a couple deep breaths as she moved her hand across my chest. We went through the motions. I'd been getting physicals from Dr. Fereby since I was in elementary school. Her daughter went to my school but I knew she wasn't allowed to tell her anything about me. Still, everytime she asked me if I was sexually active I wondered if she would go home and tell her daughter that I was a virgin. Even that time, as I lied. No, I'm not sexually active. I guessed I'd had sex once but I wished I hadn't and I'm not sure I'd wanted it to happen in the first place and it definitely wouldn't happen again. That wasn't active. That was in the past and done.

I shook my head when Dr. Fereby asked me. She had to look up from her clipboard to catch my response. "OK," is all she said. "Now, mom. If you wouldn't mind turning around, I have to take a look at the downstairs."

My mom obliged as I lay on my back. I saw that a ceiling tile had a blue thumbtack stabbed into it and I wondered how it got there, if it could fall out and stab me in the eye.

I pulled down my pants so I don't have to feel Dr. Fereby do it. No one had seen me naked since Manny. I could barely look at myself without clothes on. I wondered how small my penis looked, near her cold hands. I thought to ask her how big was the average soft penis then figured that google knew just as well. Dr. Fereby didn't make a sound until she asked me to pull up my pants.

"All good," she said. She smiled. "Mom, would you go check Jackson out at the front while I ask him a couple more questions?"

We'd never done this before. I looked at the wallpaper to see if it stood still and it did. I made eye contact with an animated lion and tried to imagine the sound of its roar. I heard a meow.

"Are you sexually active?" Dr. Fereby asked when we were alone. Her tone was the same as it was the first time she'd asked.

"No," I said, and she frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Have you ever had sex?"

"Yes."

She took a note. "When was your last encounter?"

"Months ago. Last year."

Encounter, she had said.

She asked me questions with strange phrasing. Was it receptive? Yes. Did you use protection? No. Have you had any discharge from your penis? No. Does anything hurt? No. Blood? No.

"Good," she said. "I think I'm going to have you pee in a bottle, but it's just precautionary. You don't have any infections but you've got something called a molluscum. Do you know what I molluscum is?"

She said that kids usually get molluscums from touching toys or towels or whatever they get their hands on that carries the virus. She said that people my age usually only get molluscums in the genital area after having sex with someone who also has the virus. There is a growth, she said, a small growth at the base of your penis. It will probably disappear within a couple months but you can schedule an appointment to have it removed if you wish. You should use protection until it is gone. Don't be scared. It happens. When it is gone it is gone. Remember, she said, you should always use protection. Then she smiled and it made me lightheaded because I couldn't remember if I had time to decide, to understand what was being done to me. She put her hand on my arm and it was cold. I jerked away. I apologized with my eyes because I couldn't bring myself to say I'm sorry out loud.

I met my mom in the lobby. She was holding the keys to the car out in front of her for me to grab. I told her I didn't want to drive. Though I couldn't bring myself to look, I'm sure my hands were shaking. My body would've shook if I sat still. I felt like I was vibrating. Something was attacking one of my systems and this was my body's response. Earthquake and failure. I prayed for my immune system and felt god telling me he told me so.

I turned the volume of the radio up a couple notches before my mom had a chance to speak to me. I sang along to whatever was playing. I wondered what tomfoolery the animals in the wallpaper were up to, and was relieved I hadn't checked to see if they were moving as I left that room. I willed every stoplight to turn green before we made it to the intersection but it worked only half the time. It went red then green then yellow. My mom blew through the yellow light, and I looked at her and she said, "Not a word." She was smiling. Maybe she could tell there was some place I needed to be and that it was not here with her. I felt grateful.

At home, I went straight to my room. I locked the door and pulled down my pants. There it was. What did she call it? A molluscum. Molluscum sounds like something that attaches to a fishing boat after a voyage. It was a concave bump. Smaller than the eraser on a Ticonderoga. Still I didn't want to touch it. Health classes in high school preached abstinence and warned against teenage pregnancy. Why would I listen? I figured I would've never had sex because I hadn't wanted it to be with a girl. And because I was never going to have sex, especially with a girl, I had never worried about teenage pregnancy. I did the worksheets and zoned out in lectures and thanked god that I would never look like the pictures of diseases they had shown us. But here I was, and I couldn't even remember if this bump had been on a slide. Dr. Fereby said it wasn't a big deal, but to have something from Manny attacking my body is a big deal. Manny is done and forgotten. Manny was once. Manny grabbed me, hard, and I liked it until I didn't. I left Manny on the floor of the YMCA locker room covered in blood and I liked it again. Manny is the past. He will stay there and never come back.

I pulled fingernail clippers out of my bedside table drawer and sat on the edge of my bed. For a moment I thought about leaving it. Maybe it would've stayed that size. Maybe it would've fallen off. I stared at the molluscum. Molluscum. Such an ugly fucking word. Scum. This was my punishment. God did that. God or something bigger. Manny did this. I thought I was sick and perverted and his little bitch. I was a monster. I was violent. I deserved something worse than that little mark on my body. That little blemish that might have disappeared on its own. But I had to remember. No. I don't know. Wanting to forget something makes remembering so much easier. I thought I needed to remember so I could've learned and kept the past where it belonged. I wanted to cut Manny out of me and pray he not grow back. I told myself something specific: I will get older and I will leave this town

and find a boy who is my age who has pretty eyes and soft hands that are warm when he puts them on my chest. Him and I will love each other because that is what good people do. It will be nice and I will be happy. And then I dug the fingernail clippers into my skin, around the bump, and deep. I imagined roots that twisted around my insides. I tore away at them until a chunk of skin slid off my body and onto the laminate floor. I was crying but that is nothing I'd never done before.

My carpet floor felt hard. I wondered if I was sitting on the spot where I'd spilled that burning vanilla bean candle a couple years before. I looked around my room and saw participation trophies, a yellow t-shirt from my first and last 5K, and a small telescope my aunt had gotten me as a thank you for being one of her groomsmen. I felt so young and so old at the same time. It was a moment where I could acknowledge everything behind me and look forward towards everything ahead. And everything ahead finally looked clean and pretty. I was in control. I would get my license and drive and I would speed but not too fast. I would race guys at stoplights even if I knew I would never win. I would drive and drive and drive. I would come back home clean and pretty, having seen sunsets and dipped myself in cold rivers. Then life would be mine. All I needed was my driver's license.

Forget Him Mother Muses

“That sounds terrible, Monty. Terrible,” Henry says. They sit in a studio, silent as the song Monty plays from his phone comes to an end. Monty’s cropped, vintage Knicks jersey hangs from the sharp bones sticking out of the tops of his shoulders and chaffs his nipples. Henry is 27, six years older than Monty, but his skin is burnt orange and looks like leather from his weekly appointments at Organic Glow (formerly Faux Glow). His white undershirt is unbuttoned slightly to show he’s had a long, five hour day of managing B-list pop stars. But Monty’s album release party is tonight, and the album isn’t finished. Track ten is blank.

“It’s not exactly supposed to sound like a siren’s song,” Monty says.

“It sounds like a disco ball in a blender. It’s annoying and maximalist. It’s not you. You make songs that H&Ms play for their customers.”

Monty had been working on this song for two weeks. Before, he'd listened to the other nine songs straight through and hated how he'd felt after. So he'd autotuned and pitch-corrected his vocals on track 10 until he couldn't recognize his voice. He'd dropped intrusive, rattling bass at the end of each measure. He'd hid lyrics that he hated with scattered kick drums and synths that gathered together to one earfucking climax at two minutes and forty-three seconds. Monty had labored over the song until listening would wipe his brain and make him forget who he wrote the rest of the album about.

"It's one song," Monty says.

"Every stream counts," Henry bites back. "But don't worry, we stole this snappy, bubblegum piece out from under some blonde bitch from Australia. She's on the rise, apparently. Sing over it. We'll have it mastered by tonight."

Monty reads over the lyrics:

Remember when you picked me up
In that '06 Lexus
You took me out
Looked two ways for both your exes

Remember when you kissed my neck
Yeah, I wanted it, babe
But I heard you say it, some name
Heard you whisper something like

(unrecognizable)

Amber
Amber?
Amber

Imma block your number
It's just some numbers

Imma block your number
And stalk this girl named Amber
Imma block your number
Imma block your number
Imma block your number
Don't tell me you love her

Imma block your number
It's just some numbers
Imma block your number
And get on Tumblr
Imma block your number
Unblock your number

Imma call your number
Don't tell me you still love her

"I don't want the last song on my album about getting over a cheating ex-boyfriend to end with me on tumblr waiting for him to text me."

"It's what people expect. Your last two albums were about the same little *Degrassi* star. Is he really going anywhere?"

"Fuck you."

"It's not a problem. It's what people buy. It's childish and whiny, but it sells. That's what's important. Sales, streams, whatever. You're not exactly breaking records but you've got a solid fan base that wants what they want. And what they want is three minute long pop songs about boys. This is that," Henry says jamming his finger into the printed out lyrics. "This, with your vocals, will make teenage girls and gays around the world feel better than someone who hurt them. That's good, that's iTunes top 100, that's a million streams."

"That's selling out."

“At least you’re selling,” Henry whines, “now will you sing?”

After they record the song, Henry gives Monty a set of instructions and a podcast recommendation on their way out of the studio. Monty needs to arrive at *Mother Muses* at 11, one hour after the release party is supposed to begin. Walk in when track six, “Nevermind Maybe” plays, Henry says. Walk in smiling and dancing—cameras will be flashing. There’s going to be drinks and pretty people and reporters getting paid to be there. Take some adderall, maybe. Look alive. Listen to the first episode of *The Happiness Dissected Podcast*.

“My nephew produces it,” Henry says. “I hope it’s good. I hope it works. There’s a difference between broken hearted and sad. We want one, not the other.”

“We want twink, watered down Robyn,” Monty says.

“In a way, yes,” Henry says as he crumbles up a parking ticket and tosses it over his shoulder. “Write ‘Dancing on my Own,’ and we’ll see about throwing disco balls in blenders.”

Monty reaches his hands up his crop top and crosses his arms, covering his nipples to keep them from rubbing against his jersey, and walks towards his apartment. While he was glad the album was finished, he wasn’t happy with the product. He doesn’t want the world to expect to hear snippets of Christian in every Monty album. He wants to separate himself, to forget Christian, but he doesn’t know how. How else would he write about boys? That’s what people buy, Henry had said, so it’s what Monty must provide. Sales, streams, whatever. This life he’s made for himself is now bolstered by his memories of a toxic relationship. He is stained, looking for bleach. A body wrapped in a gray zip-up hoodie jumps out from behind a van with a camera covering its face. Monty drops his hands out from his shirt and sighs.

“Are you excited for the drop tonight, Monty?” It’s Frank from TMZ. Monty recognizes his voice. He’s used to Frank waiting for him at airports or following him into parks or ambushing him after studio sessions. The gray in his clothes almost blends in with the street, Monty notices.

“Beyond,” Monty says. “Are you going to be there?”

“Did you hear what Christian said about your manhood on *Watch What Happens Live with Andy Cohen*?”

This is what happens every time Frank asks Monty a question. Monty responds with an answer and Frank responds with another question about music or his ex-boyfriend. That’s all anyone asks about. Monty wonders if that’s all there is to him—pop songs and body parts Christian has kissed.

“Andy Cohen’s guest list sounds a lot like a 2010s Teen Choice Awards,” Monty says. He’s walking still, hoping his nipples don’t start bleeding through his white jersey.

“What famous dick fits perfectly into *your* hand?” Frank asks.

Monty stops. He stares straight into the camera, into Frank’s one black eye.

“Yours, probably,” he says.

“I’m not gay.”

Not a question.

“Or famous, I guess,” Monty says as he leaves Frank behind.

Monty puts his airpods in. New York smells like piss to him. He’s not used to this odor. The street below his apartment building, when he would walk home to Christian, used to smell like rain and metal and the bagel shop with the kitten perched in an artificial plant by the front window. Monty remembers New York smelling like Christian, when they’d walk the street after work. Then the smell

changed. First, and only once, Monty smelled something floral fighting Christian's typical sandalwood and citrus fragrance. It was his co-star's perfume, he'd said. They'd had a scene together that day. It was the first work since Degrassi—important and, unfortunately, he'd assured Monty, full of falling in love. Then, after Christian texted Monty his breakup message, the street started smelling like piss. Piss and trash, after he'd seen his ex-boyfriend kissing his co-star in an Instagram post a week later. Now when paparazzi ask him about Christian, every time Monty swears someone sets those piss-filled garbage bags on fire somewhere nearby. This smell stuffs itself inside Monty's nose as he walks in the liquor store across the street from his apartment building. He plays the podcast Henry sent him.

"The Happiness Dissected Podcast is a special collaboration between NYU's Psychology and Philosophy Departments, brought to you by some sponsors, private donors, and two unpaid undergraduate students who want you to be happy."

The liquor store's brick walls are painted black, and the hardwood floors are the color and sheen of honey. The bottles are arranged in pyramids by type and price. Monty doesn't drink much but he knows that Tito's is manageable because that's what Christian used to drink with sugar-free Redbull. He spots the rose gold cap.

"We don't have a guest today for our first episode. We thought we'd talk about our own perspectives of happiness—what we've learned recently, what has smothered the sad, as we like to say."

"You like to say."

"So why don't you start us off. What do you like to say?"

Monty taps his Visa on the card reader without looking at the price and smiles at the cashier. The brown bag he walks out with is so indicative of hardship he laughs as he looks around for Frank.

He twists the paper at the top of the bag and holds the bottle by its neck. The street is starting to grow bursts of neon from signs hanging inside stores. Frank would not blend in. Monty sees that he has an hour before he's scheduled to make his entrance.

"OK, sure. One thing I've noticed recently is how important it is to make your bed. Coming home to a made bed is visually satisfying, and peeling back your covers, I'm sure, sends signals to your body that lets you know you're ready to unwind."

"Are there studies to back that up?"

"I'm sure, yeah."

Vibration. Monty pulls out his phone. There's a string of text messages from Henry:

heard about TMZ

might go viral

great work

gives me some ideas

Monty doesn't respond; he feels like a vessel, manipulated for someone else's pleasure and speeding towards some sad place, destined for neglect, like a burning cigarette. Monty puts his phone on Do Not Disturb and pauses the poorly produced undergraduate podcast. He can't remember if he made his bed this morning. It's funny what my brain chooses to forget, he thinks. He nods to the doorman as he walks in his building, and raises his bottle in a brown bag as a salute. He presses play.

"Well, I did some research for this episode. Read some philosophy. Read Nee-yut-sha."

"Nietzsche."

“Sure. He said that there is no such thing as a fairytale, happily ever after. Of course, I’m paraphrasing, but he said that we achieve happiness through hardship. That if we fill our lives with small things that make us happy, over and over, then, after a while, our happiness on a larger scale becomes stagnant and stale.”

“So you have to be unhappy before you can be happy?”

“I’m not sure if he means you have to be unhappy, but I think he’s saying that there is a formula to happiness. When something bothers you, you work to overcome it, and then you do.”

“And you’re happy?”

“Temporarily and in some sense. He says something similar about forgetfulness. That it’s not actually a bad thing, that it is essential to carrying on.”

“We should start a podcast on memory. Or Nietzsche.”

“Would you do research?”

“Suddenly, I do not remember what we were talking about. I am carrying on.”

“Great. And now, a word from our sponsors.”

“When you take Vita-Happi, the sun feels like it shines for you. These chewable vitamins, taken twice daily, satisfy your body’s B6, B12, and Vitamin D requirements. In fruity varieties, we guarantee you will be just as happy chewing them as you will after paying four small payments of 19.99 for a 60-count supply of Vita-Happi vitamins. Why chase the sun, when you can taste it?”

Monty tosses his keys onto the table beside his apartment door and watches them slide on the oiled wood until they fall onto the marble tile floor. What will he be able to afford when H&Ms stop playing his music? He takes his airpods out and places them into their case and carefully sets them on

the tabletop. Vita-Happi, hopefully. If the chewable Vitamin D somehow rearranged memory and convinced him he didn't need Christian, Monty tells himself he would overdose on the sun. For now, however, he will chase Adderall with Svedka in between showering and putting Band-Aids on his nipples and making his bed and throwing on some two-year-old Prada. He begins the process of forgetting tonight without it having even started. Maybe, when he's a couple drinks in, for a second, he will forget Christian too. Forgetting is the hardship and happiness is on the other side.

Walking, Monty can hear his voice playing through the speakers of Mother Muses from a block away. He smiles. It feels like he is singing to New York. Dance, New York! Dance even though you're sad and smell like piss-filled trash cans set on fire.

It is at the back entrance of the club, feeling the bass vibrate his body, when Monty realizes that he does not feel drunk. He's never taken Adderall with vodka but he knows the words upper and downer and that he has consumed one of each. He wonders if they cancel each other out.

Monty can tell two more songs have to play through before he can go inside. The looming, bald security guard at the door stares at him. Intimidated by the muscular male attention, Monty pulls his shoulders back and pushes his manicured hands into his pockets.

"I didn't think Monty would be this stiff in real life," an Australian accent says from behind.

Monty turns, smiling, expecting to recognize the face. He eyes blond curtain bangs and a tiny disco ball handbag and a troop of identical looking friends, but he doesn't know any of them.

"Aria," the leader says, reaching out her hand. "You stole my song."

"I did what?"

“Well, I guess you paid for it, but I did expect writing credit.”

“What song is this?”

“‘Block Your Number’,” Aria says as she starts to walk inside. “It’s no big deal, I understand the *biz*.”

Monty wonders what kind of sound the disco ball handbag would make if he threw it against the cinderblock wall of Mother Muses.

“It’s a bad song,” Monty mumbles.

“What’s that?”

“Have fun!”

As Aria opens the door, Monty can hear track five coming to an end. He imagines Henry sectioning off paparazzi and lining up shot girls, prepping for his entrance. He is not as nervous as he usually is in front of crowds, and isn’t sure if the Adderall or Svedka or apathy is to blame. The real nerves will come when he watches the Billboard Top 100 the coming weeks, unblinking, desperate for a taste of gold certification. For now, all Monty must do is walk in.

“Do I look alive?” Monty asks the security guard.

Silent, the man opens the door.

Inside smells like sweat and smoke machines. In between bright camera flashes of white, Monty can see warm purple lights bursting from the ceiling to the beat of track six:

I know what I said
I only wanted you to leave
But nevermind maybe, baby
Come back to me

Monty forces himself to smile. He throws his arms up in the air as if he's walked in on a surprise birthday party someone had already told him about. Blinded by the cameras and unsure what sounds are coming from where, Monty starts to dance. He bounces to the left and to the right a couple times before Henry is in his ear.

"Oh my god, what is that," he says, meaning Monty's dancing. "You look great, love the curls, the mesh, everything. Did you see the video? Twitter is eating it up—partly because you can briefly see your raw ass nipples and partly because you really handed it to Frank. Gave me an idea," Henry says before he loses his train of thought. One of Aria's friends walks in front of him and his eyes scan her body. She disappears into the crowd and Henry refocuses. "If we could turn you into a social media pop star, we'd have bookings left and right. You just need to get on the news, the blogs, whatever."

"Should I kill myself?" Monty asks.

Track seven blares. Henry can barely hear.

"What?" Henry laughs. "I've got it under control. I've got some special guests coming tonight that will invite some press."

"I just met Aria at the door."

"Yeah, a couple tabloids are picking up that story about you stealing her song. Could cause a war."

"I don't even like the song," Monty says, raising his voice over the music, his music.

"It doesn't matter, Monty. You're not an artist, you're a celebrity who sings. This is good. Artists don't make money. Celebrities just have to stay in the news."

"How am I going to do that?"

“Like I said, I’ve got it under control. For now, just drink some drinks, talk to reporters, look like you’re having fun. I think your friends are in a booth, back corner,” Henry says as he sashays away, chasing the comet tail of Aria’s look alike.

Monty notices eyes on him and it feels good. They’ve been waiting on me, Monty thinks. Everyone is smiling and dancing to an album he had thought was intolerable. Monty wants to join them. He’s already smiling—all that’s left is to dance. Drink first, though, then friends. Track eight has a simple beat, he remembers as he walks to the bar. Dance then. He tries to block out the final lyrics to track seven while he orders a gin and tonic:

Flight, midnight
New York always looked pretty
From the night sky
Behind, Philly calls me
You call me
Pretty

He downs the cocktail before the chorus can finish.

The lyrics to track seven surfaced after one of Christian’s 2 am Instagram DMs. *i miss u*, he’d said, *fly to philly tomorrow?* Monty responded: *idk*. But he flew to Philly the next day. While making love, fucking, Christian stuck his tongue in Monty’s ear. He had never done that before. Still in bed, pillow talking, he’d asked Christian where he’d picked up that little move. I can’t do this anymore, Christian had said, you’re suffocating. Monty flew back to New York within the hour. A week later, as he hooked up with an art dealer he’d met at a fundraiser, Monty asked the guy to stick his tongue in his ear. The tongue was too wet and nothing like Christian’s. He’d opened his eyes while they made out to make sure the art dealer couldn’t see him wipe the spit out of his ear.

He orders a new gin and tonic. Friends, now. Look at these people dancing—they like the music, he says to himself as he makes his way through the crowd. They move out of his way, honoring the owner of the voice getting stuck in their head. Monty feels more like a celebrity than ever. He feels loved, in a way. This level of attention makes his heart beat match the thumping bass of the music. Monty realizes he is capable of feeling alive without Christian beside or inside of him. Maybe Monty can forget him. Maybe this album isn't mediocre. Maybe Henry knows what he's doing. Maybe there are millions of sales and streams and dollars on Monty's horizon. Maybe the Adderall is wearing off and the drunk is coming through.

"Monty, before you sit down," a woman with a small, spiral notebook says, tapping him on his shoulder, "Sabrina from PopDaily here, could I pick your brain real quick?"

"Yes, please," Monty says before he smiles. They move off to the side of the club, surrounded by people making out, in line for the bathroom.

"I'm in love with the album so far," Sabrina says, "you've made heartbreak something you can dance to. What was the writing process like?"

"I wrote a little quatrain everytime my ex-boyfriend made me more sad than I'd thought possible." Sabrina laughs awkwardly and doesn't write anything down. "Do you actually like them," Monty asks.

"Yes, they're really fun. But what made you want to package these emotions into club mixes?"

"Henry did the packaging."

"Who's Henry?"

"My manager. Almost all of the production was outsourced."

Monty feels drunk now. When he blinks, his eyelids act as if they didn't hear his brain tell them to make it quick. Do I hate Sabrina, he wonders, or myself. Who am I? A pop star. Henry's. A body. Christian's. Alone.

"Pitchfork's coverage says you wanted people to be able to dance the pain away, to forget about who or what broke their heart. That wasn't your intention?"

"No. I can't dance."

"With all this here for you, the fans, friends, and... fortune, are you at least able to forget about who broke your heart?" she asks. "Christian Molina, right?"

She couldn't help herself. Monty looks around the room. People are dancing, their arms wrapped around someone else. That or they're laughing, talking, kissing, and buying shots for people they want to wrap their arms around. They exist and act and forget, it seems—all things Monty is not sure if he will ever be able to do.

Then the club doors swing open and cameras start to flash. At first, since he can't make out who it is, it feels like Monty is watching himself enter the party for the first time. He wonders if he is real until the crowd moves out of Christian's way. Christian is here. He must have been invited, he wouldn't have come otherwise. Henry is latched onto his shoulder, whispering in his ear, and I hate them both and Sabrina and myself.

Christian calls out Monty's name. The album still plays in the background. "Block Your Number" just started.

"Thank you," Monty says to Sabrina. He gulps down his gin and tonic, and chomps on the ice as Christian calls out his name again.

“I love you,” Monty hears him say. He ignores.

Monty looks for the DJ. He finds him in the corner opposite of where his friends are supposed to be. The DJ is young-looking, with glitter covering the top half of his face and shaved bald head. Subinatrix, his name, in LEDs, flashes in front of him and his turntable.

“Can I play something?” Monty says. He wants to play his song. He is going to play his song. He is going to forget and everyone here will see it happen. No one will ask about Christian ever again. Christian will leave. And Monty will dance.

“I don’t take requests,” Subinatrix says.

“This is my shit. My party. My music.”

Subinatrix seems bothered but concedes. He has an aux cord. Monty waits until track 9 fades out until he presses play on track 10, the recording he had saved and hidden on his phone. In between the songs, the room is almost silent. Monty feels everyone watching him, and he smiles. And the song plays.

As the synths shower in, Monty places his phone down on Subinatrix’s table. They make eye contact. The DJ is hard to read, and Monty can’t tell if he thinks this is going to be good or bad. But it doesn’t matter. Monty turns around. The dance floor is still. Bass starts to rattle behind the synths and Monty’s vocals—distant “take me, take me, take me away” repeating—tangles itself with building 808s and the numbing hum of an electric organ. People, drinks in hand, look up towards the speakers in the ceiling, and Monty imagines them praying. Christian is not on the dance floor. Henry is, though, and pushing through people to get to Monty.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asks, and Monty can tell that he is mad. But Monty doesn’t know what he is doing. He is forgetting because forgetting is an action. He is open to struggle because of what is on the other side. He understands that what he has been doing, writing song after song about Christian, has been struggling. And he is done. He feels like he is chasing a feeling of solace instead of running away from a feeling of dependence, but he isn’t sure what the difference is and knows that Henry wouldn’t understand.

“You should listen to your nephew’s podcast,” Monty says as he slaps Henry on the shoulder. “Great production. Smart kids.”

“Monty,” is all Henry says, but Monty is already on his way to the door.

When he gets there, two minutes and forty-three seconds come and the thundering bass strips something away from Monty. He stands still and doesn’t look anywhere but the door. People start to dance now, hard. Monty can feel them through the floor. Cameras flash, and Monty smiles at them as he walks out of the club.

“Monty” he hears Christian call. Or is it Henry? It doesn’t matter. Either way, he has nothing to say to either of them. He makes it to the street and keeps walking. He doesn’t smell anything. He wonders why drunk people can’t smell the alcohol on their own breath. He wonders if he can smell anything at all.

Then there is a 24-hour bakery lit up pink. And he goes inside. The store is bright, but the light wakes him up. He asks if they have anything that smells like oranges, because he likes the smell of oranges, and they do. When they pull the little cake out of its glass case and give it to him, he puts it up to his nose. They are right. It smells like oranges. There is music playing over the speakers. It settles into

Monty's ears. He feels like moonlight, diffused but enough for now. He asks the teenager behind the counter who is playing.

"Chopin," she says.

"Underground artist?" Monty kids.

"In a way, yes. Unless he's in a mausoleum."

Monty laughs, and keeps laughing, and forgets that he is supposed to eat the cake that smells like oranges. He closes his eyes and sways back and forth to the music as best he can.

Star Down

My teacher told our class that this should be fun. Find a friend, she said a month ago today, put together something interesting and pretty, follow the scientific method we discussed in class, and have fun. I remember turning to my table buddy, but she was already winking across the room at Jenny Wilkins. Looking around the room, I noticed I was the only one looking around the room. I had a good idea for the project. Ever since Mrs. Simmons mentioned a science fair at Open House, I had been brainstorming. Of course I fantasized about model volcanoes and time travel but I soon realized, after hours of secretly googling on my dad's desktop, that I would never be able to acquire all of the materials. Instead I planned for a project for which I would only need Mt. Dew and some place to run. I wanted to know if drinking soda made you quicker. This was science. An important discovery might be left undiscovered if I didn't find a partner.

After that class I walked up to Mrs. Simmons and asked if I could do the project on my own.

“You know your partner doesn’t have to be in this class, Malcolm? Any friend will do,” she said.

“Yeah, I know,” I said.

“Maybe one of your parents could help,” she said, straightening papers on her desk.

“Maybe.”

She looked at me and I looked at her, and I felt like I’d offered her a sidequest that would distract her from her journey—one that she declined.

“Let me know if you have any other questions,” she said, even though she hadn’t answered my first one.

I hated when adults treated me like something fragile or hot to the touch. My parents never did. At church a week before my project was due, my Sunday school teacher held me up after class to ask how I got the bruises on my arm. I told her about how I fell while I was chasing a stray cat who had a chunk bitten out of its ear. Still she looked over me and buttoned my shirt in a place I had missed and didn’t respond. Then her gaze went over my shoulder and she stood up. My dad was a statue in the doorway.

“What is this all about?” he asked. It must’ve been past 10:47, when I was supposed to meet him and mom outside of the sanctuary.

“I was asking Malcolm how he got those bruises on his arm,” she said. There was a silence while the two stared at each other.

“Bruises? How did you get those, son?”

“I don’t know,” I said, because I didn’t want him to know I’d been running after animals again.

“Come on then, Mack. Mom’s waiting on us.”

“How have you been holding up, Jack?” my teacher asked my dad.

“I’m fine,” he said. I made my eyes big at my Sunday school teacher because she always said if we lied in church lightning would strike us dead.

“He apologized for everything?” she asked.

“Something like that,” he said, then smiled without showing teeth.

Right around the time Mrs. Simmons assigned the science fair project, my dad’s dad died. I didn’t know him very well. Mom had always told me not to bring up grandpa. He was mean to your daddy as a baby, she’d said, and I wondered if he was meaner than my dad was to me. Either way, my dad didn’t take him dying very well. I guessed that I understood why. I didn’t want my dad to die even when he slapped my bare bottom with his work belt. But every night he had come home late—from work or from the hospital or from wherever grandpa was dying—and had locked himself in his room. I don’t think he made eye contact with me once. He wasn’t “fine,” and he definitely was in no place to help me with my science fair project. But when grandpa finished up dying, everything went back to normal—dad was only a little meaner.

I hadn’t even started on my science fair project by that Sunday. The following Thursday, a couple days before the due date, I cautiously approached my reclined parents watching *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* to ask my mom if she could drive me to the store for supplies. Dad had already taken off his work pants so I knew there was little hope for help from him. He didn’t look at me when I spoke.

“Mt. Dew?” mom asked, health-conscious. “Absolutely not.”

“Mom, it’s for science,” I said, and that seemed to work.

Dad readjusted in his seat.

“When’s it due?” he asked.

“Monday.”

“You’ll make do with whatever we have here,” he said, and when I started to complain he finally looked at me and into my eyes and said, “You should have planned better.”

“It’s hard doing it by yourself,” I said, doing what a soon-to-be-13-year-old can do to keep himself from crying.

“You couldn’t find a friend?” mom asked, as if friends are like treasure never buried.

“Drew Galligan’s dad is building him something that keeps fish and plants alive and you don’t even have to feed or water them.”

“I’m not Drew Galligan’s dad,” he said.

“Honey,” mom said, looking at dad. This made him angry.

“Do I have to do everything in this house,” he said as he snapped his recliner back into shape.

He stomped off into the kitchen and rummaged through the fridge and stomped back with a half-empty two liter Coke sloshing in his grip. “Put on shoes,” he said. “I’ll be outside.”

Outside he stood in a white t-shirt and pale blue boxers, looking up at the stars that speckled the gray-blue sky.

“Are you not cold?” I asked.

“Run to the mailbox,” he said.

“What about the soda?”

“Run to the mailbox and I’ll time you and then you’ll drink the soda and then you’ll run again.”

“But—”

“Run. Fast.”

Running, I imagined I was a deer, a buck especially, tearing through the woods. I wondered what or who I would be running towards. Other deer? My family? Safety? I imagined a bang cracking through the trees, a hunter in his stand with me in his sights. This felt the most natural. I ran faster.

“54 seconds,” my dad said as I skidded back. The smoke that winter pulled from my breath made it seem worth it, like the run was difficult and that I had done a good job.

“I used to want to be an astronomer,” dad said, his eyes angled towards heaven again. “I always wondered why no one had counted them all yet. It was like a joke to me: how many astronomers does it take to count the stars in the sky.”

He laughed.

“However many there are plus me, I used to say. Then I heard that every night there’s a star somewhere blowing up, losing all its light to make room for other, smaller stars, farther away.”

He looked at me then, studying me like Mrs. Simmons grades vocab quizzes.

“What’s the point in counting something that doesn’t shine,” he said.

I didn’t understand.

“Is a shooting star a dying star?” I asked.

“I told you I’m not an astronomer, kid,” he said. “Drink.”

He shoved the Coke into my chest. I tried to twist the cap off but it held tight. Dad, gently, grabbed the bottle and spun the cap off and held the 2-liter up to my mouth. "Don't stop," he said, but the liquid didn't have any bubbles and stung the bottoms of my teeth. I tried to push him away but of course he didn't budge. I realized how small I was, how no matter how hard I pushed or pulled he would never move.

By the time I managed to down the soda my head felt fuzzy and my mouth watered. But my dad told me to run and so I ran. The sky was plum now and the gravel driveway lit only by the yellow porch light behind me. I was running fast and away from the hunter, saving myself. Then I reached the mailbox and the jigsaw pieces of rock under my feet scrambled as I pivoted and the ground disintegrated. I fell onto my hands, gravel punching into my palms. I cried now, hard and loud. My stomach wanted nothing to do with my body. I guessed that soda did not, in fact, make you run faster. The hunter had caught me and shot me and started to gut me. I looked towards the house and for my dad but he wasn't there. My tears dried up. I guessed my body didn't need to remind itself that I was hurt. I thought about the F Mrs. Simmons would give me. I thought about a model volcano the size of my house, about jumping in to feel the bubbles and energy all around me. I thought about eruption too.

I dusted the dirt off my jeans and walked into the house where the recliners were empty and my parents' door shut and locked. For a moment, I stood there and cursed them. I imagined Drew Galligan's dad hugging my mom, having just finished his son's science fair project. All of Drew Galligan's brothers would be getting ready for bed and I would joke with them and tease them until it was time to sleep. I would tell them I loved them then, so they would fall asleep knowing so. I tried to

imagine myself going to school and being surrounded by Drew Galligan's friends but I couldn't. What would that be like? The thing about buried treasure is that everyone wants everyone else's. I guessed my mom didn't understand that friends are different, and that everyone wants their own. Is it selfish to want friends? One friend? I wouldn't mind turning in a terrible science fair project if I had a friend to do it with. Skipping steps as I made my way to my room, I thought about the name that would look good next to mine on a posterboard. I got ready for bed alone.

Then bed ended up feeling hard and unforgiving. Tossing and turning under my comforter I got a glimpse of the glitter in the night sky and thought about dreams coming true. My dad's dream had been a silly one, that's why it stayed a dream. There are too many stars to count, and even if you were able to count that high, why would you? I satisfied myself by looking up in awe and guessing there were a billion stars, give or take a couple million. Dad wasn't satisfied with that number. I wondered if it was a dad thing or a *my* dad thing. The stars are out of reach and that's what makes them stars, did he not understand that? The Sun is a star but it's different. It's our star.

I opened my bedroom window and nighttime greeted me. It was cold. I grabbed my blanket off my bed and wrapped it around my shoulders, pulling it up over my head, like a hoodie, so I looked like a ghost. Before stepping out onto the roof I grabbed my pillow because I remembered the shiny black shingles hurting the last time I was up there. A couple years ago, when I was 10, I tried to save an abandoned baby squirrel. I imagined it was looking for its mother or a friend. Not both. My mother always told me she couldn't be both. But as I crept, barefoot, towards the small, shivering animal, it leapt off the roof and into the bushes below. I stumbled back towards the window and clambered inside to find my mother with her arms crossed and a "wait until your dad gets home" on the tip of her

tongue. They did not like me going on the roof. But when my parents locked their door at night, they didn't come out until morning. I could lie on the roof tonight as long as it took to see a shooting star.

On the roof, waiting for a star to die so I could make a wish, I noticed that they all shake. Stars shake, frozen and scared, and we've always called it twinkling. It's OK, I wanted to say, don't worry about my dad. He's scary sometimes but once he copes with his dad apologizing for being mean to him when he was a kid he'll be nicer. That's what mom said, but I guessed she'd forgotten how hard he hit me after she'd told him I'd been on the roof making friends with squirrels. I wanted to tell the stars that they didn't have to be afraid, that I didn't care how many of them there are, that I only wished for someone to chase animals with, to help with my science fair project, to tease but never mean it. I'm sorry one of you has to die, but please, I said. Please, I said. But the stars stayed in their place, trembling. I could see them through the cloud of every one of my exhales. I wasn't going inside until I saw one fall out of the sky, even if it took all night.

The cold started to make me shake. I was a star, twinkling. And I felt close to something far away, something no one even dares to try and count. And I felt lucky, being there with them. I didn't have to chase them because they didn't run. They stayed with me. It was so cold. I wasn't going anywhere. All night. Me and the stars. Twinkling. Shining, in a way.

Know Nothing Until Now

We always used the back door, as if entering the house as family was a kind of secret. That door led to a room called the den: a word, short and biblical, that made me think of Daniel and lions. The walls of the den were yellow, and the gray speckled carpet always looked dirty even after my mom pushed a wet-vac over it every other month. When you have kids, she used to say, clean means disinfected not spotless. Spots last and are inevitable. In this way, home was a tattooed body after a shower. The crayon on the saffron yellow wall behind the dining room china cabinet told the story of my creativity and inclination towards the color green. The hole in the upstairs bathroom marked my older sister's terrible taste in men. Since my sister and I moved out, however, each of our spots has been covered, painted, or plastered over. From the front door, standing next to my boyfriend, Trey—who I fear wants to marry me—I can see a new leather loveseat studded with shiny metal buttons. In the same way my family is

meeting Trey for the first time today, I'm seeing how well my parents were able to erase my childhood from the walls, floors, and furniture, hoping they were thorough.

It's been three years since I graduated college. I've been in Boston for the last two, working days as fashion editor for *SScaleless* magazine—the modern big-game fishing weekly for the modern big-game man—and nights as a waiter at a male strip club. I met my boyfriend at the latter. Trey was and is a dancer. My parents, as I see them, have never danced nor do they perceive music as something the body is supposed to react to. Of course, they do not know Trey is a stripper. I tell my family my boyfriend works in casting reality television instead of a place called *Bottoms Up Top Down*. They're not conservative, just reserved. It confused me growing up, our cat dying and no one but me shedding a tear. Cameron, my older sister, would call me a drama queen and sadness would turn into anger, though I'm not sure I would've been able to explain the difference between the two.

I'm not as acquainted with this type of emotional confusion as I used to be. I try to hold on to what makes me feel good and set fire to what makes me feel bad. What I had going with Trey made me feel good. It was easy. The first time he spoke to me was after I dropped a tray of dirty gin martinis on a table of balding twinkies. I was backstage when we met and my face was red and I wanted to quit because the table had called me a bitch ass faggot. I hadn't retaliated because I needed their money. Trey came up to me, oily or sweaty, sliver of clothes hanging on, and said, "You're so much cuter when you don't look like you want to kill someone." And so, in the spirit of being cute, I thanked him. I could feel the tension in my jaw relax.

I knock for the second time. "I wasn't expecting you out front," my mom says as she answers the door. "You must be Trey." They hug. She's wearing dark jeans with a pink top that reveals some of

her sun-spotted chest. Her earrings look alive, like tiny diamond creatures climbing into her through her ear hole. Garlic, slightly burned, overpowers her vanilla bean perfume. The fragrance amalgamation makes me lightheaded. Trey holds the hug for several seconds.

“So nice to meet you, Angie,” he says.

“Oh, I love your little accent,” she says. Trey laughs.

I’ve so far kept my boyfriend a safe distance from my family. To me, this sort of introduction marks a point in a relationship where certain walls should come down in order to achieve a new level of intimacy, one that requires commitment and faith and trust and an eye for the future that I don’t have and do not want. But Trey was persistent. “Why do you want to come again?” I asked him as we packed our bags the night before the flight. “If, after a year and a half,” he said, “you’re not going to talk to me about your family, I’m going to get to know them myself. I think it’s important.” He wouldn’t look me in my eyes. This scared me. I made a couple mental leaps. I guessed that he was going to ask me to marry him sometime in the near future, and so I decided this meeting would have to go poorly so that marrying me would be something he had to rethink. Maybe he would see my family’s lack of emotional depth and understand my unspoken issues with intimacy and call off his mission for marriage. We have a good thing going. Why cross the line? Marriage is nothing but a promise, and I don’t trust anyone who tells me they will love me forever, unconditionally.

“Aren’t you the sweetest,” my mom says to Trey as she smiles big. “Come on in. Your sister and her fiancé are here too.”

Through the front door a staircase separates the living room and dining room. Both are for show. We neither live nor dine in either room. The furniture has always been too nice and chinaware

too expensive. My parents said these were “first-impression rooms,” for guests—even though we never had any. They did not change the layout of either room upon renovation, but they upgraded furniture and hung new, impressionistic paintings from the fresh blue walls.

“Fiancé?” I ask my mom.

“Mom,” Cameron cries. She stomps and the china plates rattle. “I haven’t told him yet.”

The red leaves Cameron’s round face, and she holds out her hand so I can look at her ring. Her fiancé comes in and wraps his arms around her waist. They are cuter together in person than they are online, on instagram and wherever else Cameron posts pictures of her day to day. Trey looks sturdy. He has shoulders that look like little basketballs, the kind they give to kids at amusement parks after they try and fail to throw a real basketball into a barely bent rim. Inside his hug, Cameron shines, and it reminds me of a geode. I congratulate them and introduce Trey. Cameron tells me this is Gavin. Trey stands a couple feet away from me but I can tell he wishes he was closer. He shifts his weight back and forth. I inch further away.

“They were filming a movie behind us,” Cameron says. “Had to keep myself from *screaming* ‘yes’ because it was all quiet on set.”

“Oh, really?” Trey says. “What movie?”

“We’re not sure,” Cameron says.

“Probably something Nicholas Sparks,” Gavin says.

I give him a side-eye to let him know I heard him and am choosing not to react. “Where’s Dad?” I ask the room, ready to rip off the bandage.

My dad comes in, exhaling, like being there exhausts him.

“Dad, this is Trey.”

“Trey. It’s nice to meet you, son.” Trey’s arm veins surface as the two shake hands. I had told him that applying pressure is important. I smile, for a second, before I remember that this is not supposed to go well, and curse myself for giving him this cheat code to begin with. We move to the kitchen.

My family rarely ate at the dinner table when I was a kid. We were a fast food family. But today, there’s a spread. Pork loin, canned green peas, microwave mashed potatoes and macaroni-and-cheese sit in pots, tin foil, and their original containers in a line on the stove. We serve ourselves before we sit down. The secret is placing your drink on the table first so you get to pick your seat. I ask Trey what he wants to drink and he thanks me but tells me that he can grab it himself. He doesn’t understand that I’m offering him, against my better judgment, a family dinner cheat code. But I don’t push back. I hold on to this piece of me and grab a beer for myself, place it on the table, and return to the end of the buffet line.

At the table, I sit beside Trey and across from Gavin. This is not the arrangement I would have chosen. I take a bite of mac-and-cheese and look up and make eye contact with Gavin and he doesn’t smile and I wonder, understanding Cameron’s type, how many holes in walls he has punched himself.

“Do you play any sports, Gavin?” I ask.

“Not much anymore,” he says. “Baseball in high school. Now I just lift.”

“A lot? Do you lift a lot?”

“Of weight or of the time?” He laughs. Cameron wrinkles her face at me as if my question smells bad. Trey looks at me, knowing I don’t care enough about the gym to ask him about his own workout regimen.

“Wouldn’t the answer to both questions be the same?” I ask.

I watch Gavin’s knuckles to see if they whiten around his knife and fork but they don’t. He answers right away.

“True,” he says, and genuinely chuckles, “Not enough is my answer then.”

I want to ask him what is enough but I settle in my seat instead.

“What about you, Trey?” Cameron asks, aiming her fork at his arms.

“I try to get to the gym everyday, yeah,” he says.

“Seems like you’d be in front of the camera instead of casting the people who are,” my mom says.

“He actually used to be a stripper,” I say, and my heart thumps one good time, reminding me that I’d unearthed information I’ve spent great time burying. “That explains the body.” My parents’ eyes widen, Cameron’s mouth drops open, and Gavin’s head cocks to the side in something that could be curiosity or even admiration.

“Yes,” Trey says, scanning me for some hint as to what I’m getting at. “I still perform sometimes, but I’m most focused on my career in television.”

“What would it take for us to see a little something?” Cameron asks.

“Cameron!” Mom says.

“I think that’s great,” my sister says, backpedaling, smiling. “Weston needs someone exciting.”

I ignore my sister, frustrated with the command she has over a room I'm trying to spoil. My dad clears his throat.

"Do you want kids, Gavin?" he asks, diverting a conversation that's gone way past what he's comfortable with.

"Christ, dad," Cameron says, but not harshly enough to convince me she isn't curious herself.

"Lord's name, Cameron," my mom says. "And not the time, Frank."

"Isn't this the designated time to ask?" I say.

"Yeah, I do want kids," Gavin cuts in, "so long as Cameron does as well. I've got some names swimming around my head I haven't even told her about yet." He's smiling and nudging my sister, and I decide he is an adequate amount of in love. She smiles back at him, and I realize my sister has somehow hurdled obstacles I have not been able to, and I wonder what makes her different from me. I wonder if I am the problem and always have been. I don't know, and that is a problem in and of itself.

"Best be ready to discipline," my dad says, preparing the room for his attempt at a joke, pointing at Cameron, "this one was a handful."

"Dad," Cameron says.

"We're old enough to talk about it." He's laughing.

"Everyone's young once, honey," Mom says.

They're talking about Cameron in high school. She would stay out late with boys and come home tipsy but did nothing I thought to be terribly reprehensible. My parents thought differently. I'm not sure if it had more to do with her being their first disappointing child or with the time they caught her with a bottle of pills that didn't have her name on it. After this happened, they forced her to break

up with her boyfriend and took her to a consultation with a rehab facility. And since she didn't show even a slight sign of addiction, she came right back home. She didn't speak to anyone for a week. When she finally did, she never told our parents that the bottle was mine. She never told our parents that, when they caught her with them, I was in the middle of telling her that I'd stolen them from my friend's mom. She never asked me why I had them or what I had planned to do with them. All she did was date angry boys and take an oath of silence.

"You seem much nicer than the guys she used to bring around, Gavin," my dad says.

"Remember Jake?" I asked. "Hole in the wall."

"You're gonna scare him off, boys," my mom says.

"Or me," Cameron says.

"You got the goody-goody there, uh—"

"Trey."

"Trey, you got the one we were almost pushing out of the house. Cameron would never come home."

And I tense up. "No one has *got* me," I say.

"Don't be so dramatic," Cameron says.

"Fuck you."

Trey and Gavin look at each other, embarrassed, like they walked in on something they shouldn't see. My mom scolds me for my language at the dinner table.

"Now we're back to the old days," Dad says, laughing.

"The old days when you focused all of your energy on hating your daughter," Cameron says.

I want to tell her to stop being dramatic but something tells me I shouldn't. You know when you're swimming in the ocean and you feel a wave forming in front of you. There's that moment when you have to decide whether you want to float over the wave or dive under—you have to decide if the wave is too strong or determined. At this moment, Cameron is the wave, strong and determined, much bigger than me, and there is something on the shore that desperately needs eroding. I dive under because I'm scared. I resurface and watch her as she goes.

"Hated me so much, you can't even pretend to love me in front of my fiancé."

"We could never hate you, baby," my mom says.

"Hated me so much you couldn't even tell your son wanted to kill himself."

The wave crashes into the shore and I smile but the undertow yanks at my legs. I look to the beach but everything is destroyed or gasping for air.

"What?" my mom asks.

"That is enough, Cameron," Dad says.

"Now you're worried about our guests," she says.

"We just don't know what you're talking about, sweetheart."

"We did the best we knew how," my dad says, "raising you both. When you have kids they always say the world stops and that's true, in part, but your body don't stop decaying. Every day the world is different and you're different because of it. That shit don't stop, Cameron. So when you find your daughter with a bottle of bright blue pills in her hand and nothing makes sense anymore, you might not know how to act. I'm sorry if I didn't give you a trial by jury of your peers but I did the best I could. We did the best we knew how."

“They weren’t mine, that’s what I’m saying,” Cameron says. Gavin puts his arm around her and she reaches for his hand. Trey puts his hand on my knee and I pull it away from him.

“Honey,” my mom says, but I’m not sure if she means me or Cameron. I don’t look at her.

“You found me with the bottle in my hand while I was asking your son where the fuck he got them and what the fuck he was going to do with them. But I knew. I knew what he was going to do with them,” she pauses and everything is silent, “even if he wasn’t sure himself. The Sunday before I saw him crying on the way home from church, quiet, just water rolling down his face. Who cries like that? This boy is 14 years old, what does he have to cry about? So that night I went to ask him. That’s when I caught him looking up those pictures and that’s when I came and told you. I told you because your son was sad. And all you did was take away his phone and tell him it was a phase and read him the Bible and put on a Braves game and send *me* to rehab after I saved my own brother’s miserable fucking life. Don’t tell me about your decaying body and how life is nothing but a guessing game because that’s not true. That’s not true. You should know what is right and what is wrong before you fuck something up. You should know that I would want to be the one to tell my brother that I’m engaged. You should know that at dinner with your children’s boyfriends you should shower them with praise and make them feel worthy of something more than what you gave them. You should know these things.”

I remember in a high school science class I watched a video that compared the height of tsunami waves. As the illustrated wave grew bigger, the death toll rose as well. I remember thinking that I would be able to survive. Where this ill-conceived confidence came from, I don’t know, but I told this to the girl who sat next to me and she said that I was an idiot. She said that most people probably died trapped in buildings, drowning and getting cut up by metal or glass. It didn’t matter how tall the wave

was if they weren't ready for it to crash into shore. At the table with my family, almost a decade later, I remember the look on that girl's face. How ridiculous it was I didn't know that no matter how hard you try to protect yourself, some things will always be bigger than you. Build what you want, watch it fall. Everything I'd run away from, everything I'd hidden from Trey, back at my feet—water, metal and glass.

Everyone stops eating while Cameron speaks. When she is done, she takes a mouthful of white wine and swishes it around before swallowing it all at once.

My father's hands are folded as if he is going to pray but his eyes are open. He's looking at my mother, his wife. Communicating, maybe.

"Kids," he says, eyes forward, "I hope you know that every decision we ever made was made to protect you from a world we've known for much longer. It hurts to know it didn't feel that way. Gentlemen," he says. He catches the eyes of both Trey and Gavin. "You've got a couple of good ones."

My dad stands and collects his plate and empty beer can, looking first at me and then at Cameron. I've seen disappointment in his eyes before and what is resting there now is not that.

"Honey," my mom says to my dad, but he does not respond. He drops his dishes off in the sink and walks to his bedroom. I wonder if they remodeled there as well, switched out the honey-colored bed frame I scratched my name into when I was a kid for something metal and hard.

I ask my mom if he's OK and she says yes. "He's old and remorseful," she continues, "as old people get sometimes." She smiles and checks everyone's faces to see if we enjoyed her joke as much as she did. "I think he figured that one thing he did right in his life was raise two good kids. Which We did, of course. I'm just guessing we'd both taken a little more credit than we might've deserved."

The five of us are quiet. I keep my eyes down and concentrate on picking up green peas with my spoon and putting them in my mouth one at a time. The sound forks make as they scrape plates makes me want to scream. Cameron is spinning her engagement ring around her finger. It's hard to keep track of time at a dinner gone silent, but everyone has finished their drinks by the time Trey finally speaks.

"When did you know that Cameron was the one," he asks Gavin. I look at him and he looks at me, and I see his pupils dilate. My heart beats like it's trying to break free of something ancient and cold. He's applying pressure, still.

"Well," Gavin says, smiling, relieved, reaching for Cameron's knee, "would it be annoying to say right away."

"I'll allow it," Trey says, and I reach for his knee. He lets me.

Gavin goes on about how he saw Cameron on the quad with her friends their senior year of college. He was throwing frisbee with a guy from his Spanish class. He saw her sitting in the grass, wearing pink, and kept throwing the frisbee too far left, closer and closer to her and her friends. She was laughing, and he could tell her attention was something he wouldn't mind having. He threw the frisbee one final time, intentionally far left, and it soared through his classmate's hands and knocked Cameron upside the head.

"Pissed," my sister says now.

"Oh yeah," Gavin says. "She was fuming."

She'd stood up and twisted around and saw Gavin standing there with his hands in the air. His mouth was open, dangerously close to a smile.

“I was like, ‘Who throws frisbee in the quad if they can’t aim,’” Cameron says, leaning in to the dinner table.

“So I convinced her to throw it back to me,” Gavin says. “And she threw it alright. Threw it almost 50 yards to the right into a huge magnolia.”

“He boosted me up into the tree to get it,” Cameron says. “And I told him guys usually couldn’t touch my butt until the third date. And he goes, ‘is this a date?’ And I say, ‘it can be.’”

Gavin mouths his lines.

My mom says that’s about the sweetest thing she’s ever heard.

“What about you,” Cameron says to Trey. “When did you know this one was something special.”

“I hate to admit it but it was while I was on stage,” he says. “Middle of my routine, butt naked, I heard this crash—glass breaking, a couple screams. Everyone looked, even the old guy in the front row with his hand in his pants. Everyone’s looking, right, and it turns out this one had spilled drinks over a whole table. The customers started to chew him out—and I mean, they seemed vicious. And he turned around,” Trey says as he stands and turns, ready to mimic something I don’t even remember doing. “Turned around in one place, mouthed something to himself you don’t want to hear, Angie, and then turned back to clean up the glass without saying a word except for ‘sorry.’ The table didn’t know what to do. Shut them up and he didn’t even mean to. I don’t know. When I walked backstage after my set he was standing there looking in the performers’ mirror, staring at himself. I saw him unclench his fists and smile. I knew he’d must have spent forever figuring out who he was and what mattered to him,” he says as he settles back into his seat. “I guess I was right. We’ve never been the most romantic with each

other, but I knew then that we could grow together into something worthwhile. That seems so gushy, I know, I'm sorry," he says to me. "I could just tell he wouldn't keep me around unless I did right. And that is something I definitely wanted to do. It seemed like a good fit."

Mom agrees. Cameron says that sounds like something I deserve. Everyone has finished their food except me. I've sat still, listening and thawing and asking myself if I want to believe in something that has failed me once before, convinced that it's worth the risk.

"Trey," Gavin says now, "I will be personally offended if any other man strips at my future wife's bachelorette party."

"Stop," Cameron says. "I would love that."

"He's expensive," I say, pushing my shoulder into Trey. I hear my mom laugh.

"Well can we get a sample?" Cameron asks. "Before we commit. You know we're good for the money."

Trey looks at me and I nod. He stands and unbuttons the top two buttons of his shirt and walks around to the back of my sister's chair. Cameron stares at me with a smile tearing through her face as Trey drags her chair to the center of the room. He exaggerates. These aren't the moves I've seen him do on stage. He gets his napkin off the table and whirls it in the air. Facing away from Cameron, he drops the napkin on the ground and bends to pick it up slowly. Cameron howls, and I wonder what my dad must be thinking—hearing happiness and knowing he had no part in it. I wish he would come back out. I wish I could tell him thank you—for the house over my head and food in my stomach and walls to color green with crayon. My melancholy was not his fault and was not mine, but I don't know

how to tell him that. I didn't know anything about myself, how could he? I think about going to get him but I can't take my eyes off of Trey.

"It's just like *Magic Mike*," my mom says.

I had assumed that there comes a day when the way you watch movies changes. You go from hoping your life is like what you see on the screen to having to wish your life had been like that from the start—written and directed and designed to make other people feel good. I thought that day had come and gone for me. I would have never leaned in to any real life Nicholas Sparks love story, let alone something like a Channing Tatum blockbuster. I'd become worn and affectless, denying love no matter how soft or warm or close it was. I should have known how good it would feel. I do now. I can't fuck it up.

I watch my boyfriend dance around my sister. His clothes are on. My mom claps along to his awkward humming. Gavin smiles. We all know a secret. We paint walls and excavate memories in the name of preservation and start fights we don't finish. We lean into each other. We lean too far. We listen. We protect, grow, and dance. These are the things you should know. Come in. The back door is open.

Thank you:

It's funny because I have so much to say but I'm not sure how many of the people I have to thank will read this far. I'm not even sure if I'm supposed to write an acknowledgements page. But I am because there are people I would like to thank and acknowledge.

Family, I love you—I know I don't tell you enough but I do.

Friends, thank you for being electric when you want to be and kind when you need to be.

Professors, I know what it means to read and write because of you and that means so much.

It's funny because I will reach out to all of you sometime soon, I'm sure, to let you know how much you mean to me, to thank you. But for now, because I'm so inclined, I'm writing it here. Ending my thesis on page 77 feels right. Double luck. Hopefully the sevens don't cancel each other out.

It's funny because I want to thank myself. But I'll do that on my own time, I guess.

It's funny that I'm here and you're wherever you are, having read, if you're patient, six stories I wrote this year. This horrible year. Thank you for reading. I'm sure you have other things to do. I hope you liked it all right. Let me know if you did, if you wish. If you didn't like them, I do not mind if you keep that to yourself.

It's funny, the acknowledgements page. It's the end but it says so much about the beginning. At the end, though, it is the end. It's funny.